

Body Image Perception and Social Physique Anxiety among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Body Image Perception plays a significant role in shaping an individual's psychological well-being particularly during young adulthood- a developmental stage marked by heightened self-awareness and social comparison. The present study aims to examine the relationship between body image perception and social physique anxiety. Body image perception refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward their physical appearance, while social physique anxiety involves the anxiety experienced when one believes their body is being evaluated by others.

Keywords: *Body image, social physique, Anxiety, Perception, Young Adults*

Body image refers to how individuals see, think, and feel about their physical appearance. It is not just about how the body looks in reality, but how a person *perceives* their own body. This includes thoughts about body size, shape, weight, and features like skin, hair, or muscle tone. Body image can be positive (satisfaction and acceptance of one's body) or negative (dissatisfaction, shame, or anxiety about one's appearance). Researchers have found that body image is influenced by many factors such as social norms, media images, peer pressure, family expectations, and personal experiences (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2002). For example, social media often shows unrealistic beauty standards that can lead people to compare themselves unfavorably with others.

Body image perception, specifically, is how a person *mentally sees and judges* their body. It involves the beliefs and evaluations someone forms about their body in relation to others and societal standards. It is subjective—meaning that two people with similar bodies can feel completely different about themselves. When individuals have a distorted body image perception, they might think they are "too fat," "too thin," or "not attractive" even when others don't see them that way. This mismatch between actual appearance and perceived appearance is linked to emotional challenges like low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Morgan, 2004).

In young adults, body image perception is especially important because it plays a role in self-confidence, mental well-being, and social interactions. As they grow into adulthood,

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many begin to form stable ideas about their appearance, and these ideas can either support or damage their mental health.

Social Physique Anxiety is a type of anxiety that happens when someone feels nervous or uncomfortable because they believe others are judging their body. It is not about general anxiety or shyness, but specifically about how one's *physique* (body shape, size, or appearance) is viewed in social settings.

People with high SPA often feel self-conscious in situations where their body might be seen or evaluated—like at the gym, swimming pool, or even in tight-fitting clothes. They may worry that others are noticing flaws in their appearance, even when this is not true. This anxiety can lead to behaviors such as avoiding exercise, changing clothing styles, or avoiding social events altogether (Hart et al., 1989).

SPA is commonly measured using the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS), developed to assess how much anxiety people feel when they think others are observing their bodies.

Research shows that SPA is strongly connected to body image perception—those who are unhappy with how they see their body are more likely to feel anxious when they believe others are looking at them (Lindwall & Lindgren, 2005). It also tends to affect women more than men, but men are increasingly reporting higher levels of SPA due to growing body ideals, such as muscularity.

Among young adults aged 18–25, SPA is particularly common because this age group is highly focused on physical appearance, dating, social media presence, and peer comparison—all of which can increase fear of judgment.

Relevance of Body Image and Social Physique Anxiety

Young adulthood, typically between the ages of 18 to 25, is a critical stage of identity development. During this time, individuals often become more aware of their appearance and how others perceive them. As a result, body image and social physique anxiety (SPA) become particularly important issues in this age group.

Body image during young adulthood can directly impact self-esteem, mental health, and social confidence. Many young adults compare themselves to idealized body types often seen in media and on social platforms. These comparisons can lead to body dissatisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood of experiencing SPA (Stein, Krause & Ohler, 2021).

SPA is also highly relevant at this stage because young adults are often in environments—like universities, gyms, or social events—where physical appearance may be judged. Research shows that individuals in this age group with poor body image are more likely to avoid physical activities, such as exercise or sports, due to fear of being negatively evaluated by others (Robitaille, 2014).

Increased SPA can also contribute to eating disorders, depression, low academic performance, and social withdrawal. These effects make it important to understand how body image perception and SPA interact, especially in early adulthood when lifelong habits and self-perceptions are being formed (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2002).

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Moreover, interventions targeting body image and SPA during this period have been shown to be more effective than in later life stages because the individual is still shaping their self-concept and lifestyle behaviors (Crocker et al., 2003).

Societal and Media Influence on Body Image

The way individuals view their bodies is deeply shaped by societal standards and media portrayals. In today's interconnected world, body image is not only a personal perception but also a social construct—formed through exposure to cultural norms, peer pressure, and widespread media representations of “ideal” bodies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tsartsapakis et al., (2023). This study explored how body dissatisfaction and self-esteem relate to SPA among university students, emphasizing the mediating role of social comparison orientation. The researchers used validated psychometric scales and structural equation modeling on a sample of 420 young adults aged 18–25. Results showed that individuals with higher social comparison tendencies reported greater SPA, especially when they were dissatisfied with their bodies. This supports the idea that SPA is strongly influenced by the internalization of appearance ideals and self-evaluation in social contexts. The findings suggest that reducing comparison behavior could lower physique-related anxiety, offering a practical direction for intervention programs.

METHODOLOGY

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is a significant relationship between body image perception and social physique anxiety among young adults.
- **H2:** There is a significant gender difference in body image perception among young adults.

Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between body image perception and social physique anxiety among young adults.
2. To examine gender differences in body image perception and social physique anxiety.

Sample

The target population consisted of young adults aged 18 to 25 years residing in Lucknow, India, primarily students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs across various institutions. The sample included 50 males and 50 females.

Research design

The study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to explore the relationship between body image perception and SPA. A cross-sectional survey method was used, as it allows data collection from a large number of participants at a single point in time and is suitable for identifying statistical relationships between psychological constructs.

Statistical analysis

The data obtained was tabulated and analyzed using SPSS 25 (IBM) to assess the finding of the study.

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Variables

- **Independent Variable**
-Body image perception
- **Dependent Variable**
-Social Physique Anxiety

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

1. **Body Image Satisfaction Scale (BISS):** Body image perception was measured using the **Body Image States Scale (BISS) developed by Cash et al. (2002)**. The BISS is a 6-item self-report scale designed to assess how individuals feel about their appearance at a specific moment. Each item offers a 9-point Likert-type scale, ranging from extreme dissatisfaction to extreme satisfaction. The BISS is widely validated and has demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) in college-aged populations
2. **Social Physique Anxiety scale (SPAS):** The Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS) developed by **Hart, Leary, and Rejeski (1989)** was used to measure the anxiety individuals feel when they believe others are evaluating their body. The scale includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Not at all characteristic of me' to 'Extremely characteristic of me'. It has shown high internal consistency and validity across various populations, including university students."

Procedure

1. Permission was obtained from institutional authorities where the data collection took place.
2. Participants were given a brief overview of the study's purpose and their rights.
3. Informed consent was taken from all participants before data collection.
4. Questionnaires were administered in printed form or through secure online platforms (e.g., Google Forms) to ensure convenience.
5. Average time taken per participant was 15–20 minutes.
6. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.
7. No incentives were provided to ensure voluntary participation.

Data Collection

Questionnaires were administered in printed form e.g. google form.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

To understand the general characteristics of the sample, descriptive statistics were computed for body image perception and social physique anxiety among young adults.

Table 4.1: Overall Descriptive Statistics (N = 100)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
BISS Mean	100	6.15	1.42	2.17	9.00
SPAS Total	100	35.90	11.04	12	60

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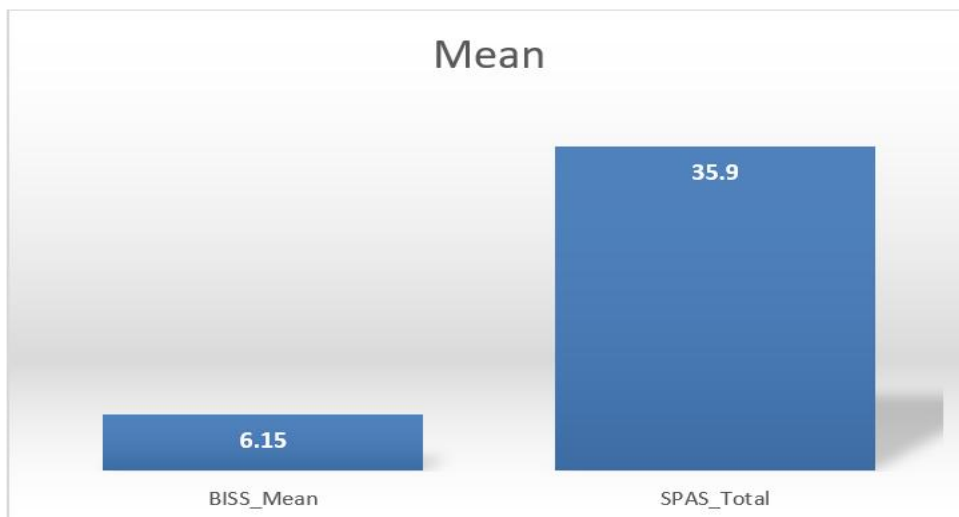


Figure 4.1. Mean Scores of Body Image Satisfaction and Social Physique Anxiety among Young Adults (N = 100)

Interpretation

As shown in Table 4.1, the mean score for body image perception (BISS_Mean) was 6.15 (SD = 1.42) on a 9-point scale, indicating that participants generally experienced mildly positive satisfaction with their body image. Scores ranged from 2.17 to 9.00, reflecting noticeable individual differences.

The mean score for social physique anxiety (SPAS_Total) was 35.90 (SD = 11.04) on a scale ranging from 12 to 60, suggesting a moderate level of social physique anxiety among participants. The wide range of scores indicates substantial variability in anxiety related to perceived evaluation of physical appearance.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics by Gender

Outcome	Male Mean (SD)	Female Mean (SD)
BISS_Mean	6.61 (1.32)	5.70 (1.37)
SPAS_Total	30.24 (9.58)	41.56 (9.43)

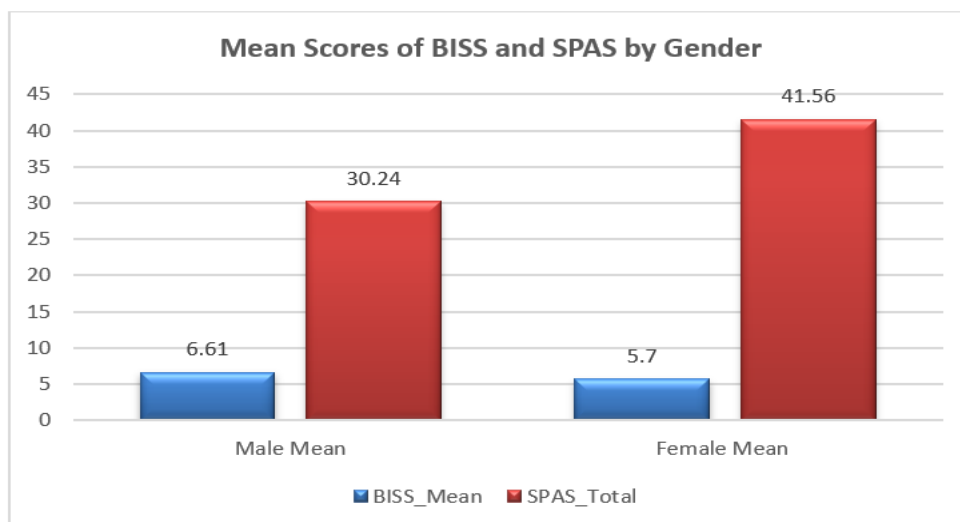


Figure 4.2. Gender Differences in Mean Scores of Body Image Satisfaction and Social Physique Anxiety (N = 100)

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Interpretation

Table 4.2 indicates that male participants reported higher body image satisfaction ($M = 6.61$, $SD = 1.32$) compared to female participants ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.37$). In contrast, female participants reported considerably higher levels of social physique anxiety ($M = 41.56$, $SD = 9.43$) than males ($M = 30.24$, $SD = 9.58$). These descriptive differences suggest possible gender disparities, which were further examined through inferential analyses.

Objective- and Hypothesis-wise Analysis

- **Objective 1:** To assess the relationship between body image perception and social physique anxiety.
- **Hypothesis (H_1):** There is a significant relationship between body image perception and social physique anxiety among young adults.

Table 4.3: Pearson's Correlation between Body Image Perception and Social Physique Anxiety ($N = 100$)

Correlations			
		BISS_Mean	SPAS_Total
BISS_Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	-.679**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
SPAS_Total	Pearson Correlation	-.679**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation (H_1)

The results reveal a strong and statistically significant negative correlation between body image perception and social physique anxiety ($r = -0.679$, $p < .001$). This indicates that individuals with higher body image satisfaction tend to experience lower levels of social physique anxiety. The strength and direction of the relationship provide clear evidence in support of Hypothesis 1, confirming that body image perception and social physique anxiety are meaningfully related.

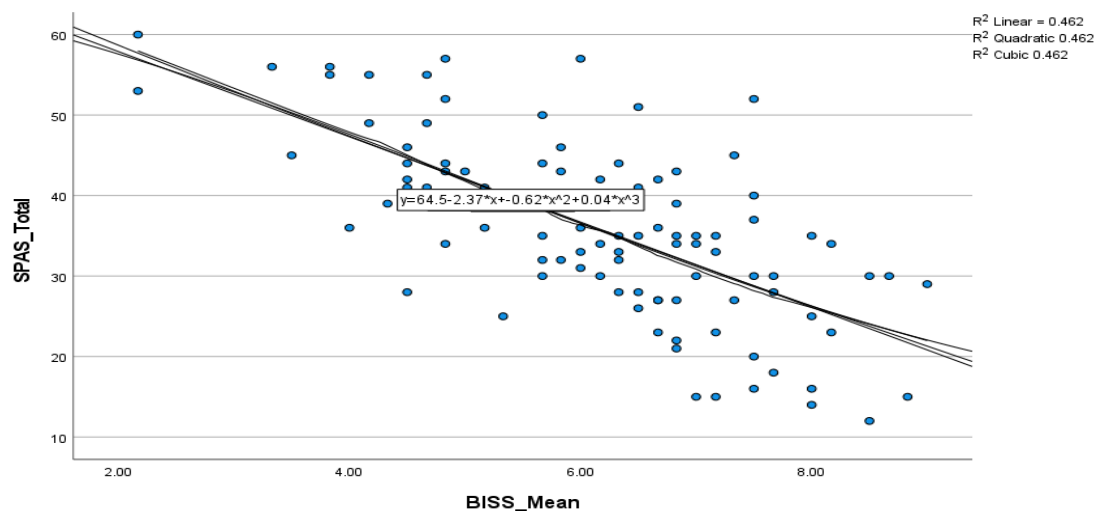


Figure 4.3. Scatter Plot Showing the Predictive Relationship between Body Image Satisfaction (BISS_Mean) and Social Physique Anxiety (SPAS_Total) ($N = 100$)

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Figure 4.3 depicts the relationship between body image satisfaction (BISS_Mean) and social physique anxiety (SPAS_Total) using a scatter plot with a fitted regression line. The downward-sloping regression line indicates a negative linear relationship between the two variables. As body image satisfaction increases, social physique anxiety decreases. The regression model shows a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.462$, indicating that approximately 46.2% of the variance in social physique anxiety is explained by body image satisfaction. This suggests a strong predictive association between the variables. The clustering of data points around the regression line further supports the statistical findings, confirming that individuals with higher body image satisfaction tend to experience lower levels of social physique anxiety.

- **Objective 2:** To examine gender differences in body image perception.
- **Hypothesis (H₂):** There is a significant gender difference in body image perception among young adults.

Table 4.4a Welch's t-test for Gender Differences in Body Image Perception

BISS Mean	Mean	SD	t (Welch)	df	p	Hedges g
Male	6.61	1.32	3.364	97.88	.001	0.668
Female	5.70	1.37				

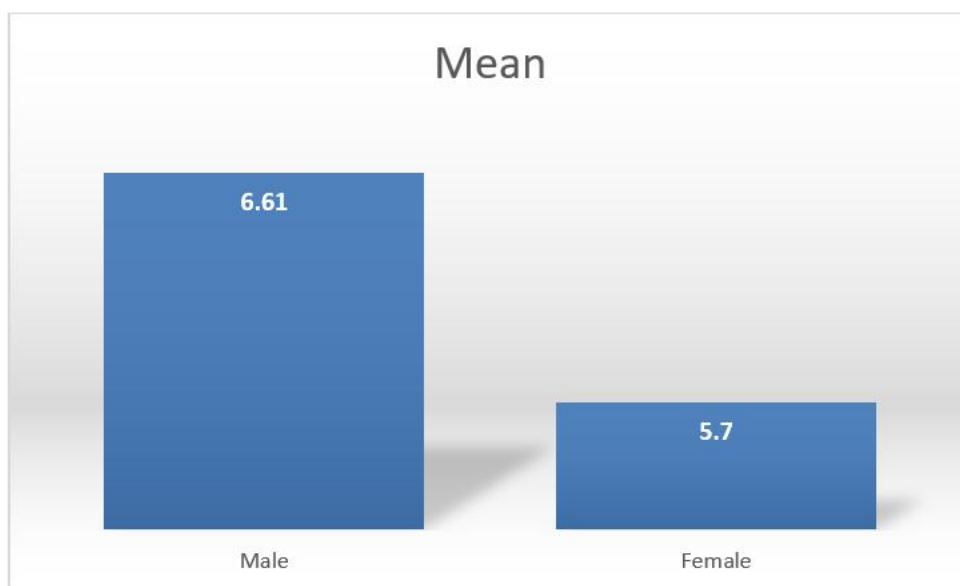


Figure 4.4a. Mean Differences in Body Image Satisfaction (BISS_Mean) between Male and Female Participants (N = 100)

Interpretation (H₂)

Male participants reported significantly higher body image satisfaction than female participants, with a mean difference of approximately 0.91 points on the BISS scale. This difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.364$, $df = 97.88$, $p = .001$) and reflected a moderate effect size (Hedges $g = 0.668$). These findings support Hypothesis 2, indicating that body image perception differs significantly by gender.

- **Objective 3:** To examine gender differences in social physique anxiety.
- **Hypothesis (H₃):** There is a significant gender difference in social physique anxiety among young adults.

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Table 4.4b Welch's *t*-test for Gender Differences in Social Physique Anxiety

SPAS Total	Mean	SD	t (Welch)	df	p	Hedges g
Male	30.24	9.58	-5.954	97.97	< .001	-1.182
Female	41.56	9.43				

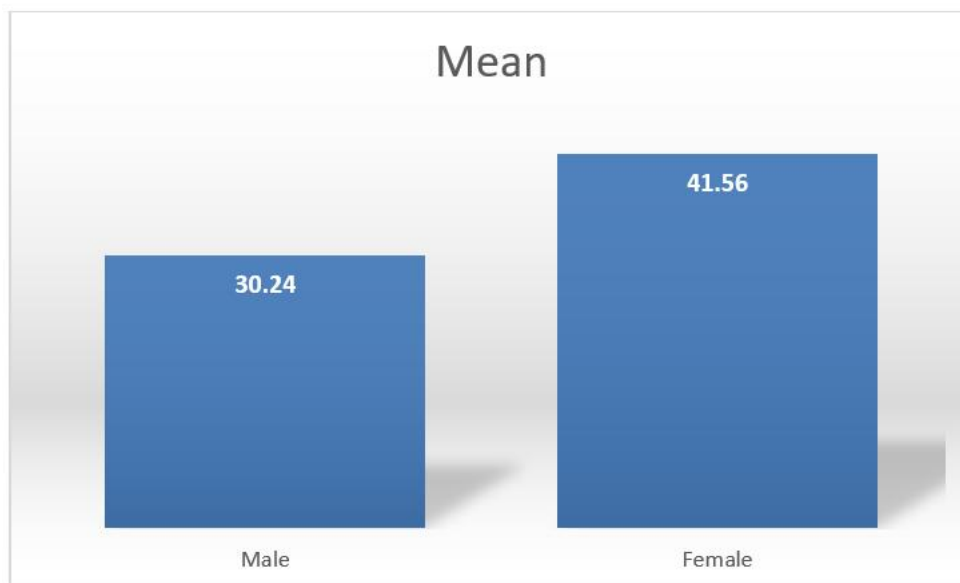


Figure 4.4b. Mean Differences in Social Physique Anxiety (SPAS_Total) between Male and Female Participants (N = 100)

Interpretation (H₃).

Female participants exhibited significantly higher social physique anxiety than male participants, with a mean difference of approximately 11.32 points on the SPAS. This difference was highly significant ($t = -5.954$, $df = 97.97$, $p < .001$) and demonstrated a large effect size (Hedges $g = -1.182$). The findings strongly support Hypothesis 3, confirming pronounced gender differences in social physique anxiety.

- **Objective 4:** To determine whether body image perception predicts social physique anxiety.
- **Hypothesis (H₄):** Body image perception significantly predicts social physique anxiety.

Table 4.5: Simple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Social Physique Anxiety (N = 100)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	68.489	3.647	18.781	< .001	[61.252, 75.725]
BISS Mean	-5.296	0.578	-9.168	< .001	[-6.442, -4.150]

Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.462$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.456$, $F(1, 98) = 84.05$, $p < .001$

Interpretation (H₄)

The regression analysis demonstrated that body image perception significantly predicted social physique anxiety. Specifically, each one-unit increase in body image satisfaction was associated with an average 5.30-point decrease in social physique anxiety ($B = -5.296$, $p < .001$). The model explained 46.2% of the variance in social physique anxiety ($R^2 = 0.462$), indicating strong predictive power. These findings provide robust support for Hypothesis 4.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the results support cognitive and sociocultural models that emphasize the role of self-perception in social anxiety. Practically, the findings underscore the need for mental health interventions targeting body image concerns among young adults, particularly females. Educational institutions can play a vital role by implementing awareness programs, counseling services, and workshops focused on promoting positive body image and reducing appearance-based anxiety.

CONCLUSION

The study clearly established that body image perception and social physique anxiety are significantly related. Young adults who were more satisfied with their physical appearance experienced lower levels of anxiety related to the fear of being negatively evaluated by others. This finding highlights the central role of body image in shaping emotional and social experiences during young adulthood.

The results revealed significant gender differences in body image perception. Male participants reported higher body image satisfaction than female participants. This suggests that young women are more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their appearance, possibly due to greater sociocultural pressure, media influence, and internalization of idealized body standards.

The study found pronounced gender differences in social physique anxiety, with females reporting significantly higher levels of SPA than males. This indicates that young women are more vulnerable to anxiety related to appearance-based evaluation in social situations. The large effect size observed for this difference suggests that gender plays a crucial role in experiences of SPA.

Body image perception emerged as a strong predictor of social physique anxiety. The regression analysis demonstrated that body image satisfaction explained approximately 46% of the variance in social physique anxiety. This finding underscores the importance of body image as a key psychological factor influencing anxiety related to social evaluation.

Overall, the findings confirm that body image perception is a critical determinant of social physique anxiety among young adults. Enhancing body image satisfaction may therefore play a vital role in reducing appearance-related anxiety and improving psychological well-being during this important developmental period.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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