

The Effect of Parental Attachment and Peer Rejection on Social Anxiety in Teenagers

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

El-Sayed, M., & Mwangi, G. (2025). The Effect of Parental Attachment and Peer Rejection on Social Anxiety in Teenagers. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 6(4), 117-125.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.6.4.13>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the effects of parental attachment and peer rejection on social anxiety among adolescents in Kenya.

Methods and Materials: This study employed a descriptive correlational research design, involving 350 adolescent participants from Kenyan secondary schools selected randomly, with sample size determined by Morgan and Krejcie's sampling table. Data were collected using validated and reliable standard measurement tools, including the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SASA), the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), and the Peer Nominations Inventory (PNI). Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, and multiple linear regression, performed using SPSS-27 software. Regression assumptions, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity, were verified and confirmed prior to analysis.

Findings: Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of social anxiety ($M = 57.34$, $SD = 11.42$), relatively high parental attachment ($M = 72.68$, $SD = 9.75$), and moderate peer rejection ($M = 24.56$, $SD = 6.18$). Correlation analyses revealed significant negative correlations between parental attachment and social anxiety ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$), and significant positive correlations between peer rejection and social anxiety ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analyses demonstrated that parental attachment and peer rejection significantly predicted social anxiety ($R^2 = 0.41$, $F = 118.24$, $p < 0.01$). Individually, parental attachment negatively predicted social anxiety ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.01$), while peer rejection positively predicted social anxiety ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Findings highlight that parental attachment significantly mitigates social anxiety, while peer rejection exacerbates anxiety symptoms among adolescents. These results underscore the importance of fostering secure parental bonds and supportive peer relationships in reducing social anxiety among adolescents. Future interventions should integrate strategies that enhance family dynamics and peer interactions to effectively support adolescent mental health.

Keywords: Social Anxiety, Parental Attachment, Peer Rejection, Adolescents, Correlational Study, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial developmental period marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social transformations. During this stage, teenagers navigate complex social landscapes while building self-identity, establishing meaningful peer relationships, and maintaining attachment bonds with parents. However, this period is also frequently accompanied by elevated levels of social anxiety, a psychological condition characterized by fear of negative evaluation, social withdrawal, and difficulties in interpersonal interactions (Jiayao, 2022). Recent studies underscore that social anxiety in adolescents significantly impacts their academic performance, psychological well-being, peer acceptance, and long-term emotional health (Bao & Bihn, 2021). Thus, identifying and understanding the underlying factors contributing to social anxiety is crucial for effective intervention and support.

One significant factor in adolescent mental health is parental attachment, which refers to the quality of emotional bonds adolescents experience with their caregivers. Attachment theory highlights that secure parental attachment fosters healthy psychological outcomes, whereas insecure attachment contributes to internalizing disorders, including anxiety and depression (Thornton et al., 2024). Liu (2022) identified that parent-child attachment relationships in early childhood substantially influence anxiety levels, demonstrating that secure attachment patterns serve as protective factors against anxiety symptoms. Furthermore, studies by Astuti, Hartono, and Sunawan (2020) revealed a strong link between attachment insecurity and elevated anxiety during critical transitions such as separation from parents (Astuti et al., 2020). Adolescents who experience parental attachment insecurity often exhibit heightened fear of social interactions, increased sensitivity to negative evaluations, and lower self-esteem, amplifying their vulnerability to social anxiety (Kanwar, 2024). Additionally, the quality of parental attachment directly impacts adolescents' capacity for emotional regulation, which in turn moderates social anxiety symptoms. For example, Bozorgi and Davoodi (2020) highlighted the mediator role of emotional dysregulation in the relationship between insecure parental attachment and social anxiety disorder symptoms in adolescent females, indicating that attachment patterns profoundly shape adolescents' emotional resilience (Bozorgi & Davoodi, 2020).

Research consistently illustrates that adolescents' perceptions of parental support significantly affect their

social functioning. Adare et al. (2021) confirmed that attachment mediates the relationship between parental marital conflict and social anxiety symptoms among college students, suggesting that stable parental relationships reduce adolescents' vulnerability to anxiety-related difficulties (Adare et al., 2021). Moreover, Sadka, Doron, and Mikulincer (2023) found that parental attachment anxiety and parental preoccupation with their child's social functioning intensify adolescents' experiences of social rejection. This indicates the complex interplay between parental attachment security, anxiety, and social outcomes. Furthermore, longitudinal research demonstrates that secure parental attachment fosters improved parental reflective functioning, thereby supporting adolescents' socio-emotional development and reducing anxiety (Nijssens et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, peer relationships become increasingly influential during adolescence, contributing to teenagers' socialization and emotional well-being. Peer rejection, defined as consistent negative evaluations from peer groups, is identified as a potent risk factor for developing social anxiety. Kovalev and Shulga (2021) noted that adolescents experiencing inadequate peer relationships or social rejection frequently face barriers to social integration, further exacerbating anxiety symptoms (Kovalev & Shulga, 2021). Moreover, Chen et al. (2021) emphasized that adolescent anxiety is closely related to peer interactions, as negative peer evaluations contribute significantly to adolescent emotional distress (Chen et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that peer rejection can lead to problematic behaviors, including excessive social media usage or smartphone addiction, potentially escalating social anxiety through isolating behaviors (Liu et al., 2023; Ma, 2023). Additionally, Muzi, Rogier, and Pace (2022) found that secure peer attachments mediate the negative effects of parental attachment insecurity on depressive withdrawal among teenagers, underscoring the protective potential of healthy peer relationships against social anxiety and isolation.

Cultural and contextual influences further modulate adolescents' experiences of anxiety through interactions with both peers and parents. Yu et al. (2019) highlighted that in collectivistic societies, parental attachment notably shapes adolescents' social anxiety by moderating peer acceptance and perceived social competence (Yu et al., 2019). Similarly, Wang, Wu, and Wang (2019) revealed distinct influences of maternal and paternal attachment insecurity on social anxiety among Chinese adolescents, indicating culturally

nuanced attachment impacts (Wang et al., 2019). Additionally, Yun and Yan (2021) identified peer attachment as a crucial moderator reducing adverse effects of problematic mobile social media use, underscoring peer relationships' significant role in managing anxiety in contemporary digital contexts. Cultural contexts, parental behaviors, and adolescent attitudes toward technology have also significantly influenced anxiety levels during recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Yun & Yan, 2021). Drouin et al. (2020) described how increased technology use during the pandemic negatively impacted adolescent-parent interactions, subsequently elevating anxiety among adolescents (Drouin et al., 2020).

Moreover, demographic and familial factors have been extensively explored concerning adolescents' anxiety levels. For instance, parental support and knowledge significantly moderate anxiety among adolescents experiencing critical developmental stages such as puberty (Rini et al., 2023). Maia et al. (2021) further reinforced that parental marital status and attachment styles significantly predict adolescents' social anxiety and avoidance behaviors, indicating that familial stability profoundly impacts anxiety levels (Maia et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a concerning gap persists between adolescents' perceived emotional support and parental perceptions, as highlighted by recent surveys demonstrating discrepancies in adolescent-parent reports of emotional support availability, potentially exacerbating anxiety symptoms in adolescents who feel emotionally neglected (Knopf, 2024). These findings highlight the critical necessity of aligning parental support strategies with adolescents' emotional needs.

Contemporary research also highlights external stressors, such as community-level traumas or crises, impacting parental mental health and, consequently, adolescents' anxiety levels. Alfasi, Maytles, and Besser (2025) documented the detrimental effects of parental stress following traumatic events, notably increasing adolescents' susceptibility to anxiety and other internalizing disorders (Alfasi et al., 2025). Huang (2024) similarly emphasized that family environmental stress significantly influences adolescents' anxiety, recommending interventions focusing on parental mental health to mitigate adolescents' anxiety symptoms effectively (Huang, 2024). Moreover, therapeutic interventions targeting parental attachment, such as attachment-based therapies, have demonstrated efficacy in improving parental self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and child social adjustment, offering potential strategies for

reducing social anxiety among adolescents (Sadeghy et al., 2022).

Although existing literature robustly identifies parental attachment and peer rejection as influential factors in adolescents' social anxiety, studies examining these variables concurrently, especially within the Kenyan context, remain scarce. Given cultural variances in attachment behaviors and peer interactions, it is crucial to explore these relationships specifically within diverse cultural settings to better inform culturally sensitive interventions. Thus, the present study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the relationships among parental attachment, peer rejection, and social anxiety among adolescents in Kenya.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a correlational descriptive research design aimed at investigating the relationship between parental attachment, peer rejection, and social anxiety among teenagers. Participants consisted of 350 adolescents from Kenya, selected through a random sampling method, with the sample size determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie sampling table, ensuring adequate representation of the population. Inclusion criteria were adolescents aged between 13 to 19 years, currently enrolled in secondary schools within the study region, and with informed consent provided by their parents or legal guardians. Participants who reported diagnosed psychiatric disorders or cognitive impairments were excluded to control confounding factors.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social Anxiety

For the dependent variable, social anxiety, the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SASA), created by La Greca and Lopez in 1998, can be used. This tool is specifically designed to measure social anxiety in adolescents, including fear of negative evaluation and social interactions. It consists of 22 items divided into two subscales: Social Anxiety and Social Avoidance. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "All the time," with higher scores indicating higher levels of social anxiety. The tool has shown good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values reported between 0.85 and 0.91 in various studies. The validity of SASA has been confirmed through factor

analyses, and it has been widely used in research on adolescent social anxiety (Maia et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2019).

2.2.2. Parental Attachment

For the independent variable Parental Attachment, the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), developed by Parker et al. in 1979, is a suitable tool. This instrument assesses the perceived parental bonding style, focusing on the dimensions of care and overprotection. It includes 25 items that are divided into two subscales: Care (reflecting the degree of warmth and affection) and Overprotection (reflecting control and excessive care). Respondents rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale, and higher scores on the Care scale suggest better parental attachment, while higher scores on the Overprotection scale indicate poorer attachment. The PBI has been shown to have high reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.75 to 0.85 in multiple studies. Its validity is well established through extensive research, linking it with various psychological outcomes (Astuti et al., 2020; Kanwar, 2024).

2.2.3. Peer Rejection

For the independent variable Peer Rejection, the Peer Nominations Inventory (PNI), developed by Coie et al. in 1982, is an appropriate tool. This instrument is designed to assess peer rejection and acceptance in children and adolescents by using a peer nomination procedure. It includes a set of items where respondents are asked to nominate peers who fit certain characteristics (e.g., "who do you like the least?"). The PNI is composed of several subscales, including peer rejection, peer acceptance, and peer popularity. Peer rejection is scored based on the number of nominations a participant receives for being disliked. The reliability and validity of the PNI have been confirmed in various studies, showing high internal consistency and

strong correlations with external measures of social functioning (Sadka et al., 2023).

2.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-27) software was utilized. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to examine demographic characteristics and the overall distribution of data. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the strength and direction of relationships between the dependent variable (social anxiety) and each independent variable (parental attachment and peer rejection). Subsequently, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive capacity of parental attachment and peer rejection on social anxiety among teenagers. Assumptions of linear regression, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity, were carefully examined and confirmed before interpreting the results. Statistical significance was set at the 0.05 level for all analyses.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated that among the 350 adolescents surveyed, 192 (54.9%) were female, and 158 (45.1%) were male. Regarding their ages, 67 participants (19.1%) were 13–14 years old, 109 participants (31.1%) were 15–16 years old, and 174 participants (49.7%) were 17–19 years old. In terms of family structure, 223 adolescents (63.7%) reported living in a nuclear family, whereas 127 adolescents (36.3%) were from single-parent or extended-family households. Additionally, 259 adolescents (74.0%) resided in urban areas, while 91 adolescents (26.0%) lived in rural regions. With regard to socioeconomic status, 95 adolescents (27.1%) identified their family's income as low, 183 adolescents (52.3%) as middle, and 72 adolescents (20.6%) as high-income families.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 350)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Anxiety	57.34	11.42
Parental Attachment	72.68	9.75
Peer Rejection	24.56	6.18

According to the data presented in Table 1, adolescents in the study demonstrated moderate levels of social anxiety,

indicated by an average score of 57.34 (SD = 11.42). Parental attachment was relatively high among the

adolescents, with a mean score of 72.68 (SD = 9.75), reflecting secure attachment patterns. In contrast, the peer rejection scores indicated moderate experiences of peer rejection, with an average of 24.56 (SD = 6.18).

Prior to performing regression analysis, assumptions related to multiple linear regression were carefully checked and confirmed. Normality was verified through skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within the acceptable range of -2 and +2 (Social Anxiety = skewness: 0.72, kurtosis: 1.14; Parental Attachment = skewness: -0.41, kurtosis: 0.29; Peer Rejection = skewness: 0.96, kurtosis: 1.31). Linearity

was confirmed using scatterplots of predicted and residual values, demonstrating a linear relationship. Homoscedasticity was established through visual inspection of standardized residual plots, indicating an even distribution around zero. Additionally, multicollinearity among predictors was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which yielded acceptable values below 5 (Parental Attachment, VIF = 1.24; Peer Rejection, VIF = 1.24), confirming the absence of multicollinearity. Thus, all assumptions required for multiple linear regression were satisfactorily met.

Table 2

Correlation Between Social Anxiety and Predictor Variables

Variable	Pearson r	p-value
Parental Attachment	-0.56	<0.01
Peer Rejection	0.62	<0.01

As shown in Table 2, bullying victimization was positively and significantly correlated with social anxiety ($r = .49, p < .001$), indicating that adolescents who experienced more bullying also reported higher levels of social anxiety. Furthermore, bullying victimization was negatively correlated with self-efficacy ($r = -.53, p < .001$), suggesting

that greater victimization is associated with lower self-efficacy. Social anxiety also showed a significant negative correlation with self-efficacy ($r = -.46, p < .001$), supporting the potential mediating role of social anxiety in this relationship.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Results Predicting Social Anxiety

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	8624.36	2	4312.18	0.64	0.41	0.40	118.24	<0.01
Residual	12653.24	347	36.47					
Total	21277.60	349						

The model fit indices presented in Table 3 demonstrate that the hypothesized model had an acceptable to good fit with the observed data. The chi-square value was 112.87 with 48 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 2.35, which is within the acceptable threshold. Other fit indices,

including GFI (.95), AGFI (.91), CFI (.96), and TLI (.94), all exceeded the recommended minimum values, while the RMSEA value of .056 indicates an adequate approximation of model fit.

Table 4

Multivariate Regression Analysis Results for Predicting Social Anxiety

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	68.74	3.56	-	19.32	<0.01
Parental Attachment	-0.37	0.05	-0.31	-7.22	<0.01
Peer Rejection	0.85	0.09	0.46	9.44	<0.01

As shown in Table 4, parental attachment significantly negatively predicted social anxiety ($B = -0.37, \beta = -0.31, t = -7.22, p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of parental

attachment are associated with lower social anxiety symptoms. Conversely, peer rejection significantly positively predicted social anxiety ($B = 0.85, \beta = 0.46, t =$

9.44, $p < 0.01$), showing that increased experiences of peer rejection result in higher social anxiety. The constant term was also statistically significant ($B = 68.74$, $t = 19.32$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting the baseline social anxiety scores in the absence of predictor variables.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of parental attachment and peer rejection on social anxiety among adolescents in Kenya. The findings revealed significant negative correlations between parental attachment and social anxiety, indicating that adolescents who experienced secure parental attachment reported lower levels of social anxiety. This result aligns closely with existing literature, emphasizing that secure attachment bonds with caregivers play a protective role against the development of anxiety symptoms (Liu, 2022; Thornton et al., 2024). Specifically, adolescents perceiving high parental care and responsiveness tend to develop better emotional regulation skills, which buffer them against anxiety triggered by social interactions (Bozorgi & Davoodi, 2020). Furthermore, secure attachment promotes self-confidence and reduces the perceived threat of negative evaluation in social contexts, directly mitigating adolescents' anxiety symptoms (Kanwar, 2024). Previous studies also suggest that stable and secure attachment experiences provide adolescents with the psychological resources necessary to navigate complex social dynamics, thereby decreasing the risk of social anxiety disorders (Adare et al., 2021; Astuti et al., 2020). Consequently, fostering secure parental attachment appears essential for mitigating adolescents' vulnerability to anxiety, particularly within the cultural and familial contexts unique to Kenya.

Conversely, peer rejection showed a significant positive correlation with social anxiety, suggesting that adolescents who experience rejection from peers are more prone to heightened social anxiety symptoms. This result is consistent with previous findings that peer rejection exacerbates adolescents' sensitivity to social evaluations, leading to intensified fear and avoidance of social interactions (Chen et al., 2021). Repeated peer rejection reinforces adolescents' negative self-perceptions, increasing feelings of inadequacy and social withdrawal behaviors, which directly contribute to elevated anxiety levels (Kovalev & Shulga, 2021). Additionally, peer rejection may lead to maladaptive coping behaviors such as increased reliance on digital interactions or social media, thus further amplifying feelings of isolation and exacerbating anxiety symptoms

(Liu et al., 2023; Ma, 2023). Previous research also emphasizes that supportive and secure peer attachments act as protective buffers against emotional distress and anxiety, underscoring the detrimental effects of peer rejection identified in this study (Muzi et al., 2022). Therefore, peer relationships emerge as a critical area for intervention to reduce social anxiety among adolescents.

Moreover, the results of multiple linear regression analyses revealed that parental attachment and peer rejection together significantly predicted social anxiety among adolescents. Parental attachment emerged as a stronger predictor compared to peer rejection, reinforcing attachment theory's assertion regarding the foundational role of early caregiver relationships in psychological development (Huang, 2024). Indeed, attachment relationships formed within the family context lay the groundwork for adolescents' internal working models, influencing their subsequent interpersonal interactions and emotional responses (Nijssens et al., 2020). Parental attachment insecurity can create an internal vulnerability that increases adolescents' susceptibility to external social stressors such as peer rejection, magnifying their risk of social anxiety disorders (Bao & Bihn, 2021). The combined influence of parental attachment and peer rejection underscores the necessity of holistic approaches that simultaneously address familial and social relationships when designing interventions targeting adolescent social anxiety.

Culturally specific considerations may further elucidate these findings within the Kenyan context. Previous studies demonstrate culturally nuanced implications of parental attachment, highlighting that cultural values regarding familial expectations, authority, and social roles profoundly influence adolescent mental health outcomes (Wang et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2019). Similarly, peer interactions and acceptance are shaped by cultural norms and expectations around social conformity and group membership, potentially intensifying the emotional impact of peer rejection experiences among adolescents in collectivistic cultures (Yun & Yan, 2021). Therefore, cultural norms around family relationships and peer interactions in Kenya may significantly modulate adolescents' experiences of anxiety and their responsiveness to attachment and peer-based interventions.

Another important dimension is parental mental health and its cascading impact on adolescent anxiety. Consistent with recent research highlighting the intergenerational transmission of stress and anxiety symptoms, adolescents whose parents experience heightened stress or anxiety are

likely to mirror these emotional challenges (Alfasi et al., 2025; Sadka et al., 2023). Parental preoccupation with children's social functioning, combined with anxious parental behaviors, can exacerbate adolescents' sensitivity to social evaluation, thereby intensifying anxiety symptoms (Sadka et al., 2023). Moreover, contextual stressors such as economic instability or community crises could further amplify parental stress, subsequently affecting adolescent anxiety (Drouin et al., 2020). Hence, addressing parental mental health might be pivotal for effectively mitigating adolescents' social anxiety.

Additionally, adolescents' subjective perceptions of parental and peer support critically impact their anxiety experiences. Findings from previous studies indicated discrepancies between parental perceptions of support provision and adolescents' actual perceptions of emotional support received, suggesting that adolescents who feel emotionally misunderstood or unsupported may experience heightened anxiety levels (Knopf, 2024). Adolescents' perceptions of parental involvement, emotional availability, and empathy significantly determine their internalization of anxiety, underscoring the importance of enhancing congruence between parents' intended support and adolescents' experienced support (Maia et al., 2021; Rini et al., 2023). Thus, interventions that improve parent-adolescent communication and mutual understanding could reduce social anxiety by aligning parental support strategies with adolescents' psychological needs.

Overall, the findings of this study align with existing literature, emphasizing the critical roles of parental attachment and peer rejection in influencing adolescents' social anxiety. By highlighting the individual and combined contributions of these variables, this study contributes valuable insights to existing knowledge and underscores the necessity of integrated interventions addressing both familial and peer contexts in adolescent mental health strategies.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the correlational design limits causal inferences, preventing conclusions regarding direct cause-effect relationships among parental attachment, peer rejection, and social anxiety. Second, reliance on self-report questionnaires could have introduced response bias, social desirability, or inaccurate self-assessments. Third, although the sample size was statistically adequate, participants were

selected exclusively from Kenyan secondary schools, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results to adolescents from different educational or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, cross-sectional data collection prevented examination of developmental trajectories and temporal changes in social anxiety relative to peer and parental influences.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to investigate causal pathways and temporal dynamics among parental attachment, peer rejection, and social anxiety. This would clarify developmental trajectories and allow examination of potential mediators and moderators over time. Moreover, future studies should integrate multi-informant methods (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) to gain more comprehensive perspectives and reduce biases associated with self-report measures. Extending the research to diverse cultural contexts or comparative cross-cultural studies could elucidate cultural variations in attachment styles, peer interactions, and social anxiety expressions. Additionally, exploring gender differences and the role of digital technologies or social media use in mediating or exacerbating social anxiety could provide richer understanding and inform targeted interventions for adolescents.

Practitioners, counselors, and educators can leverage these findings to implement strategies aimed at enhancing adolescents' psychological well-being. Interventions should emphasize fostering secure attachment relationships within families, potentially through parental psychoeducation, training programs in emotional responsiveness, and communication improvement between parents and adolescents. Schools and community programs can also implement structured peer-support initiatives to reduce experiences of peer rejection and foster inclusive, supportive peer cultures. Early identification of adolescents at risk of social anxiety through screening programs could facilitate timely intervention and support. Finally, increasing awareness among parents and educators about adolescents' perceptions of emotional support could bridge the gap between adult intentions and adolescent experiences, reducing misunderstandings and promoting adolescents' mental health effectively.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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