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Social media use and body dissatisfaction in adolescents: a narrative review

Uso de redes sociais e insatisfação corporal em adolescentes: revisão narrativa da literatura

Uso de redes sociales e insatisfacción corporal en adolescentes: revisión narrativa de la literatura

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Abstract:
Social media use is part of adolescents' everyday lives and provides a relevant context for understanding their relationship with their appearance. This exploratory narrative review discusses the association between appearance-focused online experiences and body dissatisfaction, considering the magnitude of associations, psychological mechanisms, group differences, Brazilian evidence, and prevention. The synthesis included 24 sources published between 2013 and 2026, identified through targeted internet searches and bibliographic records. Pooled evidence indicates positive, generally small associations between social media use and outcomes related to body image and eating behavior. Social comparison, self-objectification, and specific patterns of use emerge as relevant processes, without demonstrating a uniform causal relationship. Longitudinal studies suggest bidirectional relationships between appearance concerns and online experiences, as well as prospective associations with depressive symptoms. Brazilian data are predominantly cross-sectional and indicate substantial levels of body dissatisfaction but provide limited insight into the specific role of social media. Media literacy interventions and digital strategies show benefits for some outcomes, with heterogeneous findings and uncertain maintenance. Interpretation is limited by the nonsystematic selection of sources and the inclusion of different age groups. Assessment should consider content, patterns of engagement, individual vulnerability, and context, without attributing causality exclusively to platforms or equating body dissatisfaction with an eating disorder.

Keywords: Social media; Body image; Adolescent; Mental health; Eating behavior.

Resumo:
O uso de redes sociais integra o cotidiano de adolescentes e constitui um contexto relevante para compreender sua relação com a própria aparência. Esta revisão narrativa exploratória discute a associação entre experiências digitais centradas na aparência e insatisfação corporal, considerando a magnitude das associações, os mecanismos psicológicos, as diferenças entre grupos, as evidências brasileiras e as possibilidades de prevenção. A síntese reuniu 24 fontes publicadas entre 2013 e 2026, identificadas por buscas dirigidas na internet e em registros bibliográficos. As evidências agregadas indicam associações positivas, em geral pequenas, entre uso de redes sociais e desfechos relacionados à imagem corporal e ao comportamento alimentar. A comparação social, a autoobjetificação e determinadas práticas de uso aparecem como processos relevantes, sem demonstração de uma relação causal uniforme. Estudos longitudinais sugerem relações bidirecionais entre preocupações com a aparência e experiências digitais, além de associações prospectivas com sintomas depressivos. Os dados

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brasileiros são predominantemente transversais e apontam prevalências expressivas de insatisfação corporal, mas esclarecem pouco o papel específico das redes. Intervenções de educação midiática e estratégias digitais apresentam benefícios em alguns desfechos, com heterogeneidade e manutenção incerta. A interpretação é limitada pela seleção não sistemática das fontes e pela inclusão de populações de idades distintas. Conclui-se que a avaliação deve considerar conteúdo, tipo de engajamento, vulnerabilidade individual e contexto, sem atribuir causalidade exclusiva às plataformas nem equiparar insatisfação corporal a transtorno alimentar.

Palavras-chave: Redes sociais; Imagem corporal; Adolescente; Saúde mental; Comportamento alimentar.

Resumen:
El uso de redes sociales forma parte de la vida cotidiana adolescente y constituye un contexto relevante para comprender su relación con la propia apariencia. Esta revisión narrativa exploratoria discute la asociación entre experiencias digitales centradas en la apariencia e insatisfacción corporal, considerando la magnitud de las asociaciones, los mecanismos psicológicos, las diferencias entre grupos, la evidencia brasileña y las posibilidades de prevención. La síntesis reunió 24 fuentes publicadas entre 2013 y 2026, identificadas mediante búsquedas dirigidas en internet y registros bibliográficos. La evidencia agregada indica asociaciones positivas, generalmente pequeñas, entre uso de redes sociales y desenlaces relacionados con imagen corporal y conducta alimentaria. La comparación social, la autoobjetificación y determinadas prácticas de uso aparecen como procesos relevantes, sin demostrar una relación causal uniforme. Los estudios longitudinales sugieren relaciones bidireccionales entre preocupaciones por la apariencia y experiencias digitales, además de asociaciones prospectivas con síntomas depresivos. Los datos brasileños son predominantemente transversales e indican prevalencias considerables de insatisfacción corporal, pero aclaran poco el papel específico de las redes. Las intervenciones de alfabetización mediática y las estrategias digitales presentan beneficios en algunos desenlaces, con heterogeneidad y mantenimiento incierto. La interpretación está limitada por la selección no sistemática de fuentes y la inclusión de poblaciones de distintas edades. Se concluye que la evaluación debe considerar contenido, tipo de participación, vulnerabilidad individual y contexto, sin atribuir causalidad exclusiva a las plataformas ni equiparar insatisfacción corporal con trastorno alimentario.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales; Imagen corporal; Adolescente; Salud mental; Conducta alimentaria.

Introduction

Body image encompasses how individuals perceive, evaluate, and experience their own bodies. Studying this experience in adolescence requires considering both pubertal and individual changes and the contexts in which appearance is socially valued. Social media adds an environment in which self-presentation and evaluation by others occupy a substantial part of everyday life: in the United States, up to 95% of young people aged 13–17 use a platform and

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almost two thirds access one daily, while 46% of adolescents reported that social media makes them feel worse about their bodies [1].

Tiggemann and Slater studied 1,087 girls aged 13–15 and found associations between internet use and internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and drive for thinness. Participants who used Facebook had greater body image concerns than nonusers. Because the study was cross-sectional, its findings describe associations without establishing which phenomenon occurred first [2]. Since then, the literature has grown in volume and diversity of designs, with systematic reviews and meta-analyses allowing estimation of the magnitude of associations and identification of moderating factors [3-5].

A relevant question for psychiatry is whether particular social media experiences accompany emotional distress and changes in people's relationship with their bodies. This requires distinguishing access frequency, viewed content, active practices (such as editing and posting photographs), and concern with self-presentation. Body dissatisfaction, eating symptoms, and diagnosed disorders must also be distinguished because they represent different outcomes. In Brazil, the 2019 National School Health Survey estimated that approximately 30% of adolescents aged 13–17 were dissatisfied with their body image [6], reinforcing the local relevance of this topic.

This study aims to discuss the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction in adolescents, examining the magnitude of associations, proposed mechanisms, group differences, evidence available in Brazil, emotional repercussions, and prevention opportunities. The guiding question is: how do appearance-focused social media experiences relate to body dissatisfaction and repercussions for adolescents' mental health, and how consistent is the supporting evidence?

Methods

This exploratory narrative review was guided by the question: how do appearance-focused social media experiences relate to body dissatisfaction and adolescents' mental health? Sources were identified on November 11, 2026, in two stages: an initial exploratory search yielding six studies and a targeted expansion to include evidence syntheses, Brazilian studies, interventions, and publications on boys, image editing, and eating outcomes.

Targeted searches were conducted using internet search engines, PubMed records, SciELO, publisher websites, and institutional repositories. English search terms concerned social media, body image, body dissatisfaction, adolescents, systematic review, meta-analysis,

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longitudinal, randomized trial, media literacy, boys, muscularity, photo editing, and disordered eating, alongside the Portuguese terms redes sociais, imagem corporal, insatisfação corporal, and adolescentes brasileiros. Priority was given to systematic reviews and meta-analyses, longitudinal and experimental studies, research with Brazilian adolescents, and publications from 2022 onward. Earlier studies were retained when relevant to contextualizing the topic. No standardized, reproducible search strategy was applied separately to each database.

Selection was purposive, based on relevance to the guiding question and availability of information on population, design, and findings. Twenty-four sources published between 2013 and 2026 were included: three meta-analyses, three systematic reviews without meta-analysis, one umbrella review, four narrative reviews or chapters, twelve primary studies, and one public health technical document. This interval reflects the selected publications rather than a predefined time filter. Studies with university students and young adults were treated as complementary evidence; syntheses with mixed ages were identified accordingly. Sources were organized by magnitude of associations, mechanisms, temporality, usage practices, group differences, Brazilian context, clinical repercussions, and prevention. Table 1 presents their main characteristics.

The synthesis was qualitative and interpretive, comparing designs, populations, exposure measures, and outcomes. No exhaustive systematic search, independent reviewer screening, formal risk-of-bias assessment, protocol registration, or original meta-analysis was conducted. Available online texts and abstracts were consulted, without reading every reference in full. Because reviews and primary studies may share samples, their participant counts were not added together. These features limit the scope and strength of the conclusions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sources included in the narrative review.

Reference	Design	Population or sample	Main finding
U.S. Surgeon General (2023) [1]	Technical document	Young people aged 13 –17 (USA)	46% report worse body image from social media; evidence gaps
Tiggemann e Slater (2013) [2]	Cross-sectional	1,087 girls, aged 13–15	Internet and Facebook use associated with thin-ideal internalization and body concerns
Holland e Tiggemann (2016) [3]	Systematic review	Young people and adults	Social media use associated with body concerns and disordered eating
Fioravanti et al. (2022) [4]	Systematic review of experiments	43 studies; 8,637 participants	Idealized-image exposure impaired body image indicators; predominantly young adults.
Fortunato et al. (2026) [5]	Meta-analysis	45 studies; 33,086 adolescents	Small overall association (r = 0.19); variation by outcome and platform.

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Reference	Design	Population or sample	Main finding
Linhares et al. (2024) [6]	Cross-sectional (PeNSE 2019)	159,245 schoolchildren, aged 13–17	30.2% dissatisfaction; associated with female sex and emotional distress
Bonfanti et al. (2025) [7]	Meta-analysis	83 studies; 55,440 (mixed ages)	Online social comparison: r = 0.45 with body concerns; 0.36 with eating symptoms
Valkenburg et al. (2022) [8]	Umbrella review	Adolescents (general well-being)	Small, heterogeneous mental health associations; relevant individual differences.
Vandenbosch et al. (2022) [9]	Narrative review	Young people	Image platforms and selfie editing associated with poorer body image
Bugeja et al. (2026) [10]	Cross-sectional	169 women, aged 18–35	Frequent selfie editing associated with evaluation fears and cosmetic surgery acceptance
Mills et al. (2022) [11]	Theoretical review	Young people	Proposes a role for active engagement and problematic use (hypothesis)
Maheux et al. (2024a) [12]	Longitudinal (3 waves)	1,582 adolescents, aged 11–15	Bidirectional relationship between online appearance concerns and appearance self-esteem
Sanzari et al. (2023) [13]	Cross-sectional (2 samples)	University students	Weight-loss content associated with poorer body image and binge eating; positivity without protective effect
Shi et al. (2025) [14]	Longitudinal (ABCD cohort)	1,940 young people, aged 11–12	Self-reported problematic use, rather than use duration, associated with binge eating symptoms.
Lonergan et al. (2021) [15]	Book chapter	Boys and men	Appearance behaviors and seeking muscularity content associated with higher risk
Copez-Lonzoy et al. (2026) [16]	Systematic review	8 studies; 4,975 participants	Benefits for some outcomes, with heterogeneous findings and comparison limitations.
Mazzeo et al. (2024) [17]	Narrative review	Adolescents	Harm reduction, body neutrality, and algorithm regulation
Lewis-Smith et al. (2023) [18]	Randomized trial	686 girls, aged 13–18	Greater appearance diversity acceptance; no body satisfaction effect
Lira et al. (2017) [19]	Cross-sectional	212 adolescents (São Paulo)	85.8% dissatisfied; Instagram >10 times/day: OR = 4.11
Quandt et al. (2024) [20]	Cross-sectional	810 students (Pelotas)	~31% dissatisfaction; bullying associated in both sexes
Andrade et al. (2023) [21]	Cross-sectional	465 adolescents (Salvador)	Overweight associated with wanting a smaller silhouette
Maheux et al. (2024b) [22]	Longitudinal	1,594 adolescents, aged 11–15	Social media appearance concerns preceded depressive symptoms
Smith et al. (2024) [23]	Randomized trial	66 female university students	One-week break improved body satisfaction and self-esteem

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Reference	Design	Population or sample	Main finding
Kurz et al. (2022) [24]	Meta-analysis	17 studies; 8,897 post-intervention; 7,392 with follow-up	Body image: g = 0.16 post-intervention; nonsignificant at follow-up.

Note: review samples may overlap. OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval; r: correlation coefficient; g: Hedges' effect size.

Development and discussion

Overview of pooled evidence and magnitude of associations

Holland and Tiggemann's review described associations between social media use, body concerns, and disordered eating behaviors [3]. In the meta-analysis by Fortunato and colleagues, comprising 45 studies and 33,086 adolescents, the overall correlation was small (r = 0.19; 95% CI: 0.15–0.22). In the nine longitudinal studies, the association remained positive, including after adjustment for the baseline outcome (Fisher's z = 0.138; 95% CI: 0.061–0.216). Associations varied by outcome and were more pronounced for self-objectification and in Instagram-focused studies [5]. This heterogeneity prevents treating all measures of use and body image as equivalent.

The process of social comparison also warrants attention. In a meta-analysis of 83 studies with 55,440 participants of different ages, online social comparison was associated with body concerns (r = 0.45) and eating symptoms (r = 0.36) [7]. These estimates are not directly comparable to those from studies of general social media use because exposures, populations, and instruments differ. The findings support investigating how adolescents compare themselves with others without demonstrating that this process constitutes an isolated cause of distress.

Valkenburg and colleagues' umbrella review, addressing adolescent mental health generally, identified predominantly small and heterogeneous associations between social media use and well-being [8]. Individual differences were relevant: population averages may conceal favorable, unfavorable, or negligible experiences. Because the review was not restricted to body image, its contribution is to contextualize effect variability rather than provide a specific risk estimate for this outcome.

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Mechanisms, platforms, and usage practices

Appearance comparison is among the most extensively examined mechanisms. Fioravanti and colleagues included 43 experimental studies with 8,637 participants, predominantly young women. Exposure to idealized images impaired body image indicators, and appearance comparison acted as a mediator in some studies. Fitspiration and body positivity content produced variable findings [4]. Only two included studies involved adolescents. Effects observed after brief exposures in young adults should therefore not be automatically extrapolated to everyday use during adolescence.

Platform characteristics and usage practices appear relevant. Vandenbosch and colleagues' review described associations between visual features, selfie production and editing practices, and negative body image [9]. In a cross-sectional study of 169 Australian women aged 18–35, frequent selfie editing was related to greater fear of negative appearance evaluation and greater acceptance of cosmetic procedures, but showed no independent association with body dissatisfaction after the authors' adjustment [10]. This complementary finding does not establish causality. Mills and colleagues propose that active and emotional engagement and compulsive comparisons may matter more than access duration, a hypothesis requiring specific investigation [11]. The collected studies do not isolate the effects of filters and recommendation algorithms.

Temporality and bidirectional influence

Cross-sectional studies, such as Tiggemann and Slater's, cannot establish temporal precedence [2]. Maheux, Burnell, and Choukas-Bradley followed 1,582 adolescents aged 11–15 at three points during a school year. Increased online appearance concerns preceded increased appearance-contingent self-worth and were bidirectionally associated with poorer appearance self-esteem, without gender differences [12]. The pooled longitudinal estimate, smaller than the cross-sectional estimate, is consistent with this picture [5].

Longitudinal designs extend analysis beyond a snapshot of a single moment. Nevertheless, temporal precedence neither eliminates confounding nor demonstrates isolated causality. Bidirectionality suggests that body concerns may accompany changes in appearance-related social media involvement and also be reinforced by those experiences; adolescents more concerned about appearance may seek more related content and interactions. Clinical explanations should therefore allow for different trajectories [12].

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Content, time, and problematic use

In two samples of university students, Sanzari and colleagues observed that consumed content was associated with body image changes and disordered eating behaviors after controlling for gender and body mass index. Exposure to weight-loss content was related to lower body appreciation, greater fear of negative appearance evaluation, and more frequent binge eating, while body positivity or neutrality content had no protective effect in that study [13]. These findings are complementary because the sample was not exclusively adolescent, and they do not establish that a particular post causes an eating disorder.

The hypothesis that content matters more than access duration does not receive uniform support. In the adolescent meta-analysis, pooled associations for appearance-related use and time spent were similar, both around r = 0.18 [5]. In the ABCD cohort, with 1,940 participants aged 11–12, self-reported indicators of problematic social media use, rather than time spent, were associated with binge eating symptoms concurrently and prospectively [14]. The problematic-use measure employed does not itself equate to an addiction diagnosis. Together, these findings justify assessing content, engagement patterns, and functional impairment alongside hours of access.

Group differences: gender, diversity, and age

Most evidence comes from girls and women. In the adolescent meta-analysis, stronger associations occurred in samples with a higher proportion of females [5], although Maheux and colleagues' longitudinal study found no gender difference in relationships between online and offline appearance concerns [12]. Among boys and men, appearance behaviors such as posting selfies and seeking muscularity or diet content appear to confer greater risk of muscularity concerns and disordered eating [15], while fitspiration exposure increased dissatisfaction in several experiments involving men [4].

Representation gaps persist. Six of the eight studies in the review of interventions on visual platforms included only women [16]. Recent reviews highlight the need to expand research with boys, different racial and ethnic groups, and younger age groups, with longer follow-up [17]. In a trial with girls aged 13–18, a brief intervention improved an indicator of appearance-related internalized racism among Black participants [18]. The selected evidence does not permit specific conclusions about sexual and gender minority adolescents; this should not be interpreted as an absence of literature on these populations.

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Brazilian evidence

The Brazilian studies collected were predominantly cross-sectional. In a convenience sample of 212 female adolescents from São Paulo, 85.8% had body dissatisfaction. Accessing Instagram more than ten times daily remained associated with the outcome after adjustment for age, nutritional status, social class, and maternal education (OR = 4.11; 95% CI: 3.09–10.65). Participation losses of 64.3% and the researchers' own social media use instrument limit generalizability [19]. The estimate is an odds ratio rather than an equivalent increase in probability or a demonstration of causality.

In an analysis of PeNSE 2019 involving 159,245 schoolchildren aged 13–17, 30.2% reported body dissatisfaction (95% CI: 29.2–31.1). The outcome was associated with female sex, home internet access, and emotional distress indicators [6]. Having internet at home does not directly measure social media use, viewed content, or exposure intensity. In Pelotas, approximately 31% of 810 students had body dissatisfaction, associated with bullying in both sexes [20]. In Salvador, among 465 adolescents aged 10–17, anthropometric status was associated with wanting to change body silhouette, while physical activity and television time were not associated [21]. Prevalence differences should be interpreted in light of the samples and instruments used. These studies indicate that body dissatisfaction involves individual and social factors extending beyond digital experiences.

The review of interventions on visual platforms included a Brazilian adolescent trial conducted through a Facebook Messenger chatbot [16]. This experience demonstrates the possibility of using digital resources to promote positive body image, although it does not clarify the effects of habitual exposure to platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The selected evidence remains insufficient to characterize long-term trajectories among Brazilian adolescents.

Emotional repercussions and clinical assessment

In a longitudinal study of 1,594 adolescents aged 11–15, Maheux and colleagues observed that increases in social media appearance concerns preceded increases in depressive symptoms. The reverse direction was not identified in that model, and the association persisted after controlling for social media time and offline self-objectification [22]. This reinforces the importance of investigating specific experiences but does not establish that all appearance-

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concerned adolescents will develop depression. Symptoms measured with research instruments also do not necessarily equate to a depressive disorder diagnosis [22].

For eating-related outcomes, estimates vary by exposure and outcome: general social media use shows small associations in adolescent syntheses [5], whereas social comparison shows stronger associations in mixed-age populations [7]. Problematic-use indicators were also related to binge eating symptoms in early adolescence [14]. Restriction, binge eating, and compensatory practices require specific assessment. Identifying a relationship with digital content does not replace investigation of individual, family, and social factors.

As clinical implications arising from the synthesis, rather than an interview protocol validated by the presented studies, it is suggested to investigate:

- platforms used, followed content, and engagement practices such as appearance comparison, photo editing, and approval seeking [9,13];
- difficulty reducing access, perceived loss of control, and use-related functional impairment [14];
- the meaning of digital interactions, the importance of appearance for personal worth, and mood symptoms [22];
- dietary restriction, binge eating, compensatory practices, and signs of hopelessness; thoughts of death should be assessed directly when clinically relevant, without inferring them solely from body dissatisfaction [6];
- bullying experiences, including weight-related bullying, and family and social support conditions [17,20];
- muscularity concerns and consumption of diet and training content, particularly among boys [15].

Prevention and limitations of interventions

Smith, Mills, and Samson randomly assigned 66 female university students to a one-week social media break or continued habitual use. The break group showed better body satisfaction and self-esteem at the end of the period. The small sample, female university population, and brief follow-up limit extrapolation to adolescents and assessment of sustained effects [23].

In Lewis-Smith and colleagues' trial with 686 girls aged 13–18, a fictional episode addressing resistance to appearance pressures improved diversity acceptance but produced no significant difference in body satisfaction [18]. Copez-Lonzoy and colleagues' review,

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comprising eight studies and 4,975 participants, identified benefits in some digital interventions but also null findings and substantial heterogeneity in format, duration, and outcomes [16]. Improving a diversity or body-esteem indicator does not necessarily reduce eating symptoms or prevent disorders.

In Kurz and colleagues' school-based meta-analysis, 17 studies included 8,897 participants at post-intervention assessment, of whom 7,392 had data at both post-intervention and follow-up assessments. The body image effect was small immediately after intervention (g = 0.16; 95% CI: 0.06–0.26) and did not remain significant at follow-up (g = 0.03; 95% CI: -0.03 –0.10). Media literacy gains remained significant (g = 0.20; 95% CI: 0.10–0.30) [24]. Body positivity content also produces conditional findings [9,13]. Body neutrality strategies, reducing the centrality of appearance, have been proposed as an alternative but require specific investigation in adolescents [17].

At the policy level, Mazzeo and colleagues advocate harm-reduction strategies and discuss limitations of isolated measures such as labels on edited images, hiding likes, and blocking hashtags. Their review also highlights platform transparency and addressing weight-related bullying [17]. The U.S. Surgeon General's document recognizes that available evidence does not establish that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents [1]. These positions should be distinguished from clinical trial findings. The evidence presented neither establishes a universally safe access duration nor demonstrates long-term prevention of psychiatric disorders.

Limitations of the synthesis and future directions

Sources differ in age range, platforms, instruments, and outcomes, and a substantial part of the literature is cross-sectional and self-reported. Including young adults broadens discussion but reduces specificity for adolescents. Digital features and usage patterns also change faster than the scientific publication cycle. Future research should prioritize longitudinal follow-up in Brazil, more precise exposure measures, assessment of functional impairment, and inclusion of underrepresented groups. These measures are necessary to clarify mechanisms, identify vulnerable populations, and assess sustained preventive effects.

Final considerations

The collected evidence indicates associations between social media use and body dissatisfaction in adolescents, generally small on average and heterogeneous across individuals

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and outcomes. Appearance comparison, self-objectification, and problematic use are relevant assessment processes but do not demonstrate exclusive platform causality or uniform superiority of one exposure measure over another. Brazilian studies indicate substantial body dissatisfaction prevalence but provide limited insight into the specific role of social media. Educational and digital interventions show benefits in some indicators, with uncertain maintenance and limited representation of different groups. Clinical practice should integrate digital experiences into assessment of emotional distress, eating behavior, and family and social context. The exploratory nature of this review calls for interpreting its conclusions as a critical synthesis rather than a definitive risk estimate or prevention protocol.

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