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The relationship between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image: a sample of Turkish young adult men

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Abstract

Aim This study aims to examine the relationship between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image in young adult men.

Methods This cross-sectional study was conducted between July 15, 2024, and September 15, 2025, involving 245 male individuals residing in the city center of eastern Turkey. The research data were collected using a Personal Information Form, the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS), and the Male Genital Self-Image Scale (MGIS). Data were analyzed using the SPSS 20.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Descriptive statistics (number, percentage, minimum and maximum scores, mean, standard deviation), ANOVA, independent samples t-test, Cronbach's α, simple linear regression, and multiple regression analyses were utilized in the evaluation.

Findings The participants' average age was 21.37 ± 2.24 years, and their average daily social media usage time was 4.83 ± 2.85 h. It was found that 71.4% of the participants were university graduates, 37.6% were in a romantic relationship, and 70.2% had a normal body mass index. The mean SAAS score was 31.84 ± 11.74, while the mean MGIS score was 23.26 ± 4.54. A negative and low-level significant relationship was found between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion This study found that participants exhibited low levels of social appearance anxiety and high levels of genital self-image, and Social appearance anxiety was found to explain 4.6% of the variance in genital self-image. There is a need for more comprehensive research that systematically examines influential factors across diverse populations and age groups.

Keywords Body image, Genital image, Anxiety, Social appearance

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Introduction

Social appearance anxiety refers to an individual's perception that others negatively evaluate them regarding their physical attributes. Such perceptions may lead to enduring negative emotions, including low body image, worry, fear, and dissatisfaction [1–5]. Age, gender, body weight, and negative body image have been identified as significant risk factors for social appearance anxiety [6–8]. Social appearance anxiety, which is usually associated with all body parts, is more intense during adolescence [6, 9].

A strong connection exists between social appearance anxiety and body image. Individuals who place excessive importance on others' evaluations tend to shape their physical appearance in accordance with these assessments. This tendency can hurt their body image [1, 6].

Culture, race/ethnicity, and media are often examined together, as they mutually reinforce one another in shaping perceptions of body image. Among these factors, culture stands out as one of the most potent determinants of body image [10]. Cultural norms and expectations can influence individuals' body image perceptions by establishing fundamental beauty standards. This process not only influences their psychological well-being but also plays a significant role in shaping their worldview and personal development [11].

Some studies report a positive correlation between social media addiction and social appearance anxiety, suggesting that increased social media use may trigger or exacerbate anxiety [9, 12–14]. Particularly, idealized body perceptions on social media platforms can induce feelings of inadequacy, thereby increasing social appearance anxiety and contributing to the deterioration of body image [1, 9, 13, 15, 16].

Genital self-image is a concept considered a fundamental component of sexual health and constitutes a significant part of body image. This self-perception notably affects an individual's sexual and psychological well-being [17]. One's genital self-image directly influences the quality of sexual life and the resulting sexual pleasure; furthermore, this factor also plays a vital role in the development of sexual orientation [17–24].

Some studies conducted across different populations have reported that individuals experience various concerns regarding the physical characteristics of the genital area, such as size, shape, and proportion [25–29]. Generally, dissatisfaction with genital appearance arises when a person perceives a discrepancy between their own genital appearance and the appearance that is considered ideal [30]. Genital self-image has been found to relate closely to social attractiveness, cognitive-emotional evaluations, sexual experiences, and sexual health education. Sociocultural influences -including media representations of genital ideals and narratives, peer/partner feedback, and sexual encounters- shape individuals' genital body image perspectives [31]. A study involving men from Canada, the United States, and Western Europe found that men's genital self-image is significantly influenced by perceived body image and social appearance anxiety [32]. Although a number of studies have been conducted in other countries, few were undertaken in Türkiye. Highlighting the need for population specific investigation.

Overall, research on genital image is considerably less abundant compared to studies on body image, with the majority of existing research focusing on women, while men remain relatively underrepresented. Because issues related to poor body image have historically been encountered more frequently by women than by men. Moreover, women are more likely than men to experience anxiety about their bodies due to the heightened social emphasis placed on the female body [10]. The tendency to consider reproductive organs primarily within the context of their biological and reproductive functions has led to a lack of association between these structures and individuals' perceptions of their body image, resulting in this topic being overlooked mainly in scientific research.

Although societal expectations regarding body image have traditionally centered on women, the growing concern observed among men in recent years indicates that body image has increasingly become a cross-gender issue [10, 33]. However, previous studies have largely focused on Western populations, which limits the generalizability of their findings to other cultural contexts. Cultural norms, ideals of masculinity, and societal attitudes toward male body image may influence men's perceptions and anxieties in culturally specific ways. In particular, research examining the relationship between genital self-image and social appearance anxiety among men in non-Western societies remains limited. Therefore, conducting similar research within the cultural and gender-specific context of Türkiye is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of these associations. This study aims to examine the relationship between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image in young adult men.

Research questions:

1. What is the level of social anxiety among Turkish young adult men?
2. What is the level of genital body image perception among Turkish young adult men?
3. What is the relationship between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image in young Turkish young adult men?

Method

Study design

This cross-sectional study was conducted in accordance with the STROBE guidelines [34]. The study was carried out between July 15, 2024, and September 15, 2025, among men in a province in eastern Turkey. This study obtained data through face-to-face interviews in social environments predominantly frequented by young adult males (such as university campuses, cafés, etc.).

Participants and procedure

The study population comprised males aged 18–25 who resided in the city center. An a priori power analysis was conducted based on Cohen's conventional effect size benchmarks to determine the required sample size [35, 36]. The power analysis indicated that, for a Pearson correlation test with a significance level of 0.05, an effect size of 0.20, and a desired power of 90%, data should be collected from approximately 211 participants. To account for potential data loss, the data were collected from 245 individuals. Data was collected using a haphazard sampling method, one of the non-probability sampling methods.

Inclusion criteria

- being a male between the ages of 18 and 25
- not having any communication impairments
- not having any diagnosed chronic illnesses

Exclusion criteria

- Male participants with congenital or acquired physical deformities may influence their perception of body image.
- The male participants had a prior clinical diagnosis of mental health disorders (e.g., anxiety, depressive disorders).
- The male participants who provided incomplete responses to the questions.

Data collection tools

The Information Form (developed by the researcher), the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS), and the Male Genital Self-Image Scale (MGIS) were employed as data collection instruments.

Information form

This form was developed by the researchers based on previous studies related to the subject [1–10, 25–29]. It consists of 15 items designed to collect information on men's sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, educational level, and family type), as well as their body image perceptions and social media use. Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 10 participants to assess item clarity; data obtained from the pilot study were not included in the analyses.

Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS)

The Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) was developed by Hart et al. (2008) as a self-report instrument to assess individuals' anxiety regarding their social appearance [37]. The scale applies to individuals aged 18 years and older. It consists of 16 items and has a unidimensional structure. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all appropriate, 5 = Very appropriate), with the first item being reverse-coded. The total score is calculated by summing the responses across all items, resulting in a possible range of 16 to 80. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social appearance anxiety.

In the Turkish adaptation study of the scale [38], internal consistency was determined as Cronbach's α 0.93, test–retest reliability was $r = 0.85$, and split-half reliability was found to be 0.88. In this study, Cronbach's α was found to be 0.91.

Male genital self-image scale

The Male Genital Self-Image Scale (MGSIS) was developed by Herbenick et al. (2013) as a self-report measure to assess men's feelings and beliefs about their genital organs [39]. The scale applies to men between the ages of 18 and 60. The MGSIS consists of 7 items and has a unidimensional structure. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree). The total score is calculated by summing responses across all items, yielding a possible range of 7 to 28. Higher scores indicate a more positive self-image of the genital area. In the Turkish adaptation [40], the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was reported as 0.92, the test–retest reliability coefficient as 0.73, and the split-half reliability coefficient as 0.87. In this study, Cronbach's α was found to be 0.86.

Data collection

The data were collected in social environments predominantly frequented by young adult males (such as university campuses, cafés, etc.). After the socio-demographic questions were completed, the questionnaires containing the scale items were given directly to the participants, and they were asked to respond to the remaining items.

Before the study, written ethical approval was obtained from the Atatürk University Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee (Date: July 12, 2024, No: B.30.2.ATA.0.01.00/468). Young adult men who met the research criteria were informed about the study, and data were collected after obtaining their consent. The ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki were adhered to throughout the study. Body Mass Index (BMI)

is calculated by dividing a person's Weight in kilograms by the square of their Height in meters. The standard formula is: BMI = Weight (kg)/Height (m) ^2. BMI < 17.0 indicates moderate and severe thinness, BMI < 18.5 indicates underweight, BMI = 18.5–24.9 indicates normal weight, BMI ≥ 25.0 indicates overweight, BMI ≥ 30.0 indicates obesity [41].

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS 22 package program. Number, percentage, minimum–maximum scores, mean, standard deviation, independent samples t-test, variance, Pearson's correlation analysis, Cronbach's α coefficient, simple linear regression, and multiple regression analyses were used to analyze the data. The data's conformity to the normality assumption was calculated with the "Kurtosis "and "Skewness" coefficients (± 1.5). The skewness and kurtosis values of the scales are presented in Table 6.

Results

Table 1 presents the distribution of mean scores for participants on the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) and the Male Genital Self-Image Scale (MGSIS) according to socio-demographic characteristics. Accordingly, the mean age of the participants was 21.37 ± 2.24 years, and they spent an average of 4.83 ± 2.85 h per day on social media. It was determined that 71.4% of the participants had higher education, 37.6% were employed, 73.9% lived in a nuclear family, 51.0% had a moderate economic status, and 70.2% were within the normal weight range according to their body mass index (BMI). Among the socio-demographic variables, only employment status was associated with differences in genital image scores.

As shown in the Table 2, participants' SAAS scores ranged from 16 to 72, with a mean score of 31.84 ± 11.74. Based on these results, it can be stated that young adult men had a low level of social appearance anxiety. Participants' MGSIS scores ranged from 7 to 28, with a mean score of 23.26 ± 4.54, indicating that young adult men had above-average perceptions of their genital self-image.

Table 3 presents the distribution of participants' mean scores on the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) and the Male Genital Self-Image Scale (MGSIS) according to selected variables. Statistically significant differences were found in SAAS mean scores based on the purpose of social media use, satisfaction with physical appearance, perception of physical attractiveness, presence of a girlfriend/partner, influence of social media videos and, use of filters while sharing visuals on social

Table 1 Socio-demographic distribution of the study sample

Characteristics						
Age (Mean ± SD): 21.37 ± 2.24						
Time Spent on Social Media (hours/day, Mean ± SD): 4.83 ± 2.85						
Variables			**SAAS**		**MGIS**	
	n	**%**	**($\overline{X}$ ± SD)**	**Test and *p* value**	**($\overline{X}$ ± SD)**	**Test and *p* value**
Educational status						
Secondary education	70	28.6	31.56 ± 11.51	t= −0.242	22.57 ± 4.93	t= −1.523
Higher education	175	71.4	31.96 ± 11.86	*p* = 0.809	23.55 ± 4.36	*p* = 0.151
Employment Status						
Employed	92	37.6	31.50 ± 13.00	F = 0.068	24.23 ± 4.14	F = 3.787
Unemployed	78	31.8	32.14 ± 11.35	*p* = 0.935	22.36 ± 4.68	*p* = 0.024
Student	75	30.6	31.96 ± 10.59		23.04 ± 4.73	
Family Type						
Nuclear family	181	73.9	31.04 ± 10.79	F = 1.856	23.49 ± 4.29	F = 0.832
Extended family	58	23.7	34.43 ± 13.95	*p* = 0.158	22.62 ± 5.44	*p* = 0.436
Other	6	2.4	31.00 ± 14.50		22.83 ± 1.47	
Economic status						
Insufficient	28	11.4	32.68 ± 10.79	F = 0.315	22.11 ± 5.24	F = 1.035
Moderate	125	51.0	32.21 ± 11.96	*p* = 0.730	23.44 ± 3.96	*p* = 0.357
Sufficient	92	37.6	31.10 ± 11.79		23.39 ± 5.04	
Body Mass Index (BMI) – Weight Status						
Underweight	10	4.1	32.40 ± 13.48	F = 0.280	22.90 ± 4.43	F = 0.598
Normal weight	172	70.2	31.43 ± 11.18	*p* = 0.840	23.08 ± 4.63	*p* = 0.617
Overweight	54	22.0	32.69 ± 13.42		24.00 ± 4.26	
Obese	9	3.7	34.11 ± 11.03		23.00 ± 5.02	

n Number, % percentage, $\overline{X}$ Mean, *SD* Standard deviation, *F* Variance, *t* Independent samples t-test, *p* Significance

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 Participants' minimum–maximum and mean scores on the scales

Scales	*n*	Theoretical value		Received value		$\overline{X}$±SD
		Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	
SAAS	245	16.00	80.00	16.00	72.00	31.84 ± 11.74
MGSIS	245	7.00	28.00	7.00	28.00	23.26 ± 4.54

n Number, $\overline{X}$ Mean, *SD* Standard deviation

Table 3 Comparison of participants' mean scores on the SAAS and MGSIS according to selected variables

			SAAS		MGIS	
Variables	*n*	%	($\overline{X}$ ± SD)	Test and *p* value	($\overline{X}$ ± SD)	Test and *p* value
Purpose of Social Media use						
Communicating with the opposite sex	25	10.2	37.36 ± 15.33		23.32 ± 5.80	
Obtaining information	38	15.5	32.50 ± 13.86		23.57 ± 3.59	F = 0.270
Keeping up with people	23	9.4	35.52 ± 12.16	F = 2.875	23.00 ± 3.21	*p* = 0.897
Entertainment	125	51.0	30.62 ± 10.22	*p* = 0.024***	23.05 ± 4.83	
Other	34	13.9	29.05 ± 9.72		23.85 ± 4.30	
Satisfaction with physical appearance						
Yes	216	8.2	30.95 ± 11.27	t=–3.290	23.51 ± 4.39	t = 2.362
No	29	11.8	38.44 ± 13.17	*p* = 0.001*	21.41 ± 5.30	*p* = 0.019***
Perceiving oneself as physically attractive						
Yes	185	75.5	30.26 ± 11.16	t= –3.799	23.61 ± 4.49	t = 2.111
No	60	24.5	30.71 ± 12.21	*p* = 0.000*	22.20 ± 4.59	*p* = 0.036***
Having a girlfriend/partner						
Yes	117	447.8	29.47 ± 10.79	t= –3.067	23.88 ± 4.63	t = 2.023
No	128	52.2	34.00 ± 12.18	*p* = 0.002**	22.71 ± 4.41	*p* = 0.044***
Being influenced by Social Media Videos[a]						
Yes	98	40.0	34.77 ± 12.59	t = 3.252	23.26 ± 4.61	t= –0.011
No	147	60.0	29.89 ± 10.73	*p* = 0.001**	23.27 ± 4.52	*p* = 0.991
Use of Filters When Sharing Visuals[b]						
Yes	37	15.1	35.89 ± 13.51	t = 2.295	23.16 ± 3.99	t= –0.155
No	208	84.9	31.12 ± 11.28	*p* = 0.023***	23.28 ± 4.64	*p* = 0.877
Considering aesthetic procedures						
Yes	90	36.7	33.60 ± 12.05	t = 1.825	23.38 ± 4.01	t = 0.284
No	155	63.3	30.81 ± 11.47	*p* = 0.069	23.21 ± 4.84	*p* = 0.777
Satisfaction with Genital Area[c]						
Satisfied	217	88.5	31.53 ± 11.85	F = 2.903	23.79 ± 4.32	F = 14.449
Not satisfied	9	3.7	41.00 ± 10.68	*p* = 0.057	18.33 ± 2.87	*p* = 0.000*
Undecided	19	7.8	31.00 ± 9.42		19.57 ± 4.75	

n Number, % percentage, $\overline{X}$ Mean, *SD* Standard deviation, *F* Variance, *t* Independent samples t-test, *p* Significance

*$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.05$

[a]General visual content on social media

[b]Sharing general photographs on social media

[c]Subjective evaluation of the participant's genital organs

media (Table 3, $p < 0.05$). However, in the multiple regression analysis, only the purpose of social media use, perceived physical attractiveness, having a girlfriend/partner, and the influence of social media videos remained significant predictors of social appearance anxiety, indicating that these variables retained their independent effects when other factors were controlled (Table 4).

In addition, statistically significant differences were found in MGSIS total mean scores according to satisfaction with physical appearance, perception of physical attractiveness, presence of a girlfriend/partner, and overall genital satisfaction (Table 3, $p < 0.05$). However, in the multiple regression model, only overall genital satisfaction emerged as a significant predictor of male genital self-image, suggesting that this variable accounted for the unique variance in genital self-image when the effects of other related factors were taken into account (Table 5).

According to Table 6, a negative and low-level correlation was found between social appearance anxiety and Male genital self-image. In other words, as

Table 4 Multiple regression analysis of factors influencing social appearance anxiety

	Beta	SE	Standardized Beta	t	p	AdjR²	%95 Confidence Interval	
Constant	37.230	5.566	-	6.688	0.000	-	26.264	48.195
Purpose of Social Media Use	-1.600	0.596	-0.164	-2.685	0.008	0.142	-2.773	-0.426
Satisfaction with Physical Appearance	1.274	2.668	0.035	0.478	0.633		-3.982	6.531
Perceiving Oneself as Physically Attractive	5.312	1.997	0.195	2.660	0.008		1.377	9.246
Having a Girlfriend/Partner	3.486	1.450	0.149	2.404	0.017		0.630	6.341
Being Influenced by Social Media Videos	-3.893	1.492	-0.163	-2.609	0.010		-6.833	-0.954
Use of Filters When Sharing Visuals	-3.794	1.952	-0.116	-1.944	0.053		-7.640	0.051

SE Standard error

$p < 0.05$

Table 5 Multiple regression analysis of factors influencing male genital self-image

	Beta	SE	Standardized Beta	t	p	AdjR²	%95 Confidence Interval	
Constant	28.604	1.288	-	22.208	0.000		26.067	31.141
Satisfaction with Physical Appearance	-0.575	1.049	-0.041	-0.548	0.584	0.094	-2.643	1.492
Perceiving Oneself as Physically Attractive	-0.998	0.782	-0.095	-1.277	0.203		-2.538	0.542
Having a Girlfriend/Partner	-0.484	0.574	-0.053	-0.844	0.400		-1.614	0.646
Satisfaction with Genital Area	-2.275	0.513	-0.279	-4.435	0.000		-3.286	-1.265

SE Standard error

$p < 0.001$

Table 6 The relationship between men's mean SAAS and MGSIS scores

Scales	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α	Test and *p* value
SAAS	1.182	0.935	0.91	*r*=-0.223
MGSIS	-1.044	1.103	0.86	$p = 0.001$*

r: Pearson's correlation analysis

*$p < 0.01$

social appearance anxiety increased, genital self-image decreased. The results of the simple linear regression analysis revealed that social appearance anxiety was a significant and negative predictor of male genital self-image ($R^2 = 0.050$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.046$, $F = 12.752$; $p = 0.000$). Social appearance anxiety explained 4.6% of the variance in male genital self-image scores. A one-unit increase in social appearance anxiety score resulted in a −0.087 unit decrease in male genital self-image score (Table 7).

Discussion

In this study, it was found that male participants had low levels of social appearance anxiety. Similarly, Turan et al. reported low levels of social appearance anxiety among males in their study [42]. This similarity observed in the results is thought to be related to the cultural structure.

Culture is one of the fundamental factors shaping individuals' thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors. The literature suggests that differences in physical self-perception between men and women are linked to variations in socialization patterns [10]. Social norms define what is considered an acceptable body type, influencing individuals' self-perceptions and behaviors [11]. The meaning attributed to the body within a cultural context differs between femininity and masculinity. In Turkish culture, the concept of the body is predominantly associated with the female body, which is considered the most ideal representation of corporeality. This perception is rooted in women's close association with the physical dimension of existence through their reproductive functions, roles, and responsibilities, resulting in a stronger identification with the body [43]. In contrast, masculinity is perceived as an indicator of adequacy from social, cultural, economic, and biological standpoints [44]. In this context, the low levels of social appearance anxiety observed among the male participants in this study may be associated with cultural roles, social norms, and perceptions of masculinity.

Another significant factor that shapes body image and contributes to social appearance anxiety is the use

Table 7 Simple linear regression analysis: social appearance anxiety as a predictor of male genital self-image

	Beta	SE	Standardized Beta	t	*p*	AdjR²	F	%95 Confidence Interval	
Constant	26.024	0.822	-	31.660	0.000*			62.363	75.136
SAAS	-0.087	0.024	-0.223	-3.571	0.000*	0.046	12.752	1.527	4.489

*$p < 0.00$

of social media [45]. This study found that the purpose of social media use, perception of one's bodily attractiveness, being influenced by social media videos, and the presence of a girlfriend all had an impact on social appearance anxiety. Today, it is well known that people frequently use social media for various purposes such as spending time, communicating, sharing photos, and playing games. According to the Digital 2024 April Report, individuals spend an average of 2 h and 20 min daily on social media [46]. In this study, however, it was found that the average time men spent on social media was 4.83 ± 2.85 h per day. It is thought that spending significantly more time than average on social media negatively affects body image perception and consequently leads to social appearance anxiety. In today's era of technology and digitalization, beauty standards can vary depending on social media trends. This situation significantly influences individuals' perceptions of body image and, in some cases, may lead to increased anxiety. Arslan and Tolan (2022) reported a significant positive relationship between social appearance anxiety and social media addiction [14]. Similarly, a study conducted in China found a positive association between adolescents' frequency of using social networking sites and the extent to which they engaged in body image comparisons on these platforms [47]. Tiggemann et al. also reported a significant relationship between the amount of time spent on the internet and social networking sites and heightened levels of body image-related concerns [48]. It has been suggested that social media can negatively affect individuals by by steering them toward socially desirable beauty ideals and the desire for social acceptance [1, 15, 49–52]. Research findings also indicate that having a girlfriend significantly influences social appearance anxiety. Papapanou et al. (2023) stated that loneliness is a significant predictor of social appearance anxiety; as feelings of loneliness increase, individuals' anxiety about their social appearance also rises [53]. It is thought that being liked and preferred by the opposite sex positively influences self-confidence and body image perception, which in turn plays a significant role in social appearance anxiety. There is a negative relationship between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal relationships [9].

In this study, the genital self-image perceptions of men were calculated to be above average. Consistent with the findings of the present study, Herbenick et al. (2013) reported that the majority of men had positive perceptions of their genital anatomy [39]. Although genital self-image is considered an important component of overall body image, it is defined in the literature as a distinct and more specific psychological construct. In this regard, Cash (2004) conceptualized body image as a multidimensional construct that includes evaluations of specific body regions, whereas Wiederman (2012) emphasized that genital self-image is related to, yet partially independent from, overall body satisfaction and is primarily shaped by subjective evaluations of the genital area [54, 55]. In this study, overall genital satisfaction was also found to significantly influence genital self-image. This finding supports the notion that men's genital self-image is largely formed on the basis of direct evaluations of the genital region. The literature indicates that male genital self-image is closely associated with factors such as genital appearance, perceived conformity to normative standards, functionality, and sexual adequacy [56, 57]. Additionally, a study conducted with men attending the urology clinic of a university hospital in Turkey reported significantly lower levels of genital satisfaction among men who were dissatisfied with their genital size and function, experienced premature ejaculation, and were dissatisfied with their sexual lives [58]. These findings suggest that genital satisfaction occupies a central role in men's genital self-image and represents a critical factor for both psychological and sexual well-being.

As a result of analyses conducted in line with the study's aim, a negative and low-level relationship was identified between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image. Social appearance anxiety accounts for 4.6% of the variance in genital self-image scores. Perceived body image and social appearance anxiety have been shown to influence genital self-image [32]. In both women and men, a positive genital self-image is associated with generally favorable feelings towards one's body [20]. Conversely, a negative body image can contribute to psychological issues and a reduction in sexual activity [59–61].

The relatively low variance explained by our model may reflect the influence of factors not measured in this study. Previous research suggests that variables such as culture, sexual self-efficacy, and overall psychological well-being may play a significant role in shaping genital self-image [10, 11, 44, 58–61]. These factors were not examined in the present study; therefore, future research should include them to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what affects genital self-image.

Conclusion and recommendation

According to the research findings, young adult males were found to have low levels of social appearance anxiety, while their perceptions of genital self-image were above average. A negative and low-level significant relationship was identified between social appearance anxiety and genital self-image. Furthermore, social appearance anxiety was found to be an essential predictor of individuals' perceptions of their genital image. Body image and perceptions of social appearance significantly affect not only individuals' physical well-being but also their psychological well-being. The relationship between these variables and mental health is particularly

noteworthy in the context of psychological indicators such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. A low perception of body image plays a determinative role not only in psychological problems but also in individuals' sexual lives. Therefore, to promote public mental health and reduce negative perceptions related to body image, there is a need for comprehensive studies with larger samples conducted across diverse geographical regions.

Implication of practice

In this study, social appearance anxiety was identified as a predictor of men's genital self-image. Given that the literature links social appearance anxiety and negative body image to various mental health concerns, it is essential for healthcare professionals (including psychologists, sexual health specialists, urologists, nurses, and mental health counselors) to assess perceptions of body and genital image and to design appropriate educational, preventive, and therapeutic interventions. Considering cultural influences in the management of body image and social appearance anxiety is critical. Developing psychoeducational programs that promote realistic body standards and strengthen individuals against societal appearance pressures may help reduce social appearance anxiety and enhance genital self-image. Incorporating genital self-image into sexual health services may further improve psychological functioning and quality of life. Therefore, integrating genital self-image into counseling processes, utilizing supportive therapeutic approaches, and implementing multidisciplinary treatment plans when necessary is recommended.

Research limitation

Topics such as sexuality and genital anatomy are still considered taboo within the cultural context of our society, often evoking feelings of privacy, embarrassment, or discomfort among individuals. This cultural sensitivity resulted in challenges during participant engagement, constituting one of the limitations of the present study. Specifically, some individuals either declined participation or submitted incomplete responses due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, thereby extending the data collection process. Additionally, the single-center design, the focus on a young adult population and the use of a non-probability sampling method were recognized as further limitations of the study.

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Authors' contributions

AK: Conceptualization, Methodology, AJY, ZY: Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation, ZDÜT: Visualization, Investigation, Supervision, Software, Validation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

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Data availability

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Before the study, written ethical approval was obtained from the Atatürk University Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee (Date: 12.07.2024, No: B.30.2.ATA.0.01.00/468). Young men who met the research criteria were informed about the study, and data were collected after obtaining their consent. Ethical principles and the Declaration of Helsinki were adhered to throughout the study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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