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Cyberbullying Exposure and Rejection Sensitivity as Predictors of Social Withdrawal

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the predictive roles of cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity in explaining social withdrawal among Malaysian adolescents.

Methods and Materials: A correlational descriptive design was employed with a sample of 424 secondary school students in Malaysia, selected based on the Krejcie and Morgan sample size table. Participants completed standardized questionnaires assessing cyberbullying exposure (European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire), rejection sensitivity (Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire), and social withdrawal (Child Behavior Checklist subscale). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, with Pearson's correlation tests used to examine the relationships among variables and standard multiple linear regression employed to identify the predictive power of the independent variables on social withdrawal. All assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were verified prior to regression analysis.

Findings: Pearson correlation results showed that social withdrawal was significantly and positively correlated with both cyberbullying exposure ($r = .41$, $p < .01$) and rejection sensitivity ($r = .52$, $p < .01$). The regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 421) = 109.72$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .34, indicating that the model explained 34% of the variance in social withdrawal. Both predictors made significant contributions: cyberbullying exposure ($B = 0.21$, $\beta = .28$, $t = 5.25$, $p < .001$) and rejection sensitivity ($B = 0.17$, $\beta = .41$, $t = 7.88$, $p < .001$).

Conclusion: These findings highlight the significant influence of both cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity on adolescent social withdrawal. Rejection sensitivity emerged as a stronger predictor, suggesting that internal psychological dispositions may amplify the behavioral consequences of external stressors. Intervention programs targeting both online victimization and

emotional-cognitive vulnerabilities are essential for mitigating social withdrawal in adolescents.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, Rejection Sensitivity, Social Withdrawal, Adolescents.*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, adolescents navigate a complex social terrain in which peer interactions increasingly unfold in online environments. As social media platforms become embedded in everyday life, the phenomenon of cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive and distressing threat to adolescent well-being. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs in virtual spaces where anonymity, permanence, and public exposure amplify its psychological effects. Defined as repeated and intentional aggression conducted through electronic means, cyberbullying exposure has been consistently linked to internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Vatansever et al., 2023). Among vulnerable populations, especially adolescents, cyberbullying victimization represents not only an immediate emotional burden but also a risk factor for longer-term maladaptive behavioral responses, including disengagement from peer networks and avoidance of social contexts (Zhang, 2024).

Social withdrawal, conceptualized as the consistent tendency to avoid social interaction despite the availability of such opportunities, is often viewed as a maladaptive coping strategy among youths exposed to social or emotional stressors. Research suggests that social withdrawal is both a behavioral manifestation and a psychological consequence of persistent peer rejection or victimization, including through digital channels (Jiang et al., 2020). Adolescents who withdraw socially may do so to protect themselves from further harm or emotional rejection; however, such avoidance can perpetuate a cycle of isolation, low self-worth, and impaired social competence (Bondü et al., 2020). Understanding the factors that predict social withdrawal in adolescence is critical, not only for early identification of at-risk individuals but also for designing targeted psychological interventions. While cyberbullying exposure is a well-documented risk factor, emerging evidence suggests that its effects may be intensified or moderated by internal psychological dispositions—one of the most significant being rejection sensitivity.

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is defined as a cognitive-affective processing disposition characterized by anxious expectations, heightened perception, and intense emotional responses to perceived interpersonal rejection (Shin et al., 2024). Individuals with high rejection sensitivity tend to over-interpret social cues as signs of exclusion, which in turn leads to maladaptive emotional and behavioral reactions such as hostility, withdrawal, or depressive symptoms (Li & Junyan, 2022). Rooted in early attachment disruptions and parental rejection, RS becomes particularly salient during adolescence, a developmental stage marked by heightened peer evaluation and the need for social belonging (Ali & Rohner, 2025). According to the theory of interpersonal acceptance-rejection, individuals who experience significant rejection in childhood are more likely to exhibit heightened rejection sensitivity in adolescence and adulthood (Ali & Rohner, 2025). In this context, the interplay between external stressors (e.g., cyberbullying) and internal vulnerabilities (e.g., RS) may jointly predict whether adolescents withdraw socially in response to rejection.

The literature reveals a consistent association between RS and various emotional and behavioral difficulties. For instance, RS has been linked to depressive symptoms, non-suicidal self-injury, and reduced self-compassion among adolescents (Jiang et al., 2020). It also predicts maladaptive outcomes in romantic relationships, including jealousy, emotional dysregulation, and avoidant behaviors (Mishra et al., 2024; Richter & Schoebi, 2021). High RS individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous or neutral interpersonal cues as evidence of rejection, triggering anxiety and withdrawal (Kraines et al., 2018). These maladaptive interpretations are often sustained by underlying emotional regulation difficulties and cognitive distortions (Hafner et al., 2019). As such, RS not only reflects individual differences in sensitivity to social threats but also serves as a transdiagnostic risk factor across internalizing psychopathologies.

Recent empirical work has expanded the scope of RS to include context-specific dimensions. For example, Balaya and Sündermann (2024) distinguished between appearance-based and race-based RS and found both to significantly predict body image disturbances (Balaya & Sündermann, 2024). In digital settings, online rejection sensitivity has emerged as a parallel construct with comparable predictive power for social anxiety and digital disengagement (Andrews et al., 2022). Denehey (2023) emphasized the moderating role of attachment styles in shaping behavioral responses to rejection, suggesting that individuals with insecure attachment and high RS are especially vulnerable to withdrawal and self-protective distancing (Denehey, 2023). Similarly, Dorfman and colleagues (2020; 2022)

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demonstrated that high RS impairs individuals' capacity for wise reasoning and openness in workplace conflicts, particularly when the rejection source is ambiguous or interpersonal in nature (Dorfman, 2022; Dorfman et al., 2020). These findings support a cognitive-affective model of RS that is dynamic, situational, and deeply influential in shaping interpersonal behavior.

When considering the intersection between RS and cyberbullying, the risk for social withdrawal appears to be compounded. The online environment, characterized by indirect communication and asynchronous feedback, may exacerbate RS tendencies by increasing the likelihood of misinterpreting social cues. Gong et al. (2024) showed that biological factors such as testosterone levels and genetic polymorphisms could further influence rejection sensitivity, indicating a biopsychosocial model of vulnerability (Gong et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Charoensukmongkol (2023) highlighted the role of workplace cyberbullying and political skill in modulating the effects of perceived rejection, pointing to broader organizational and contextual factors that shape RS outcomes (Charoensukmongkol, 2023). Sigler (2024) further introduced the concept of rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD), a more extreme variant characterized by disproportionate emotional reactions and avoidance behavior in response to perceived rejection, often linked to ADHD and mood disorders (Sigler, 2024).

The digital context in which adolescents interact may also serve as a catalyst for reinforcing rejection-related cognitions. For instance, exposure to violent online games and unsupervised media use has been shown to increase aggressive behavior and desensitization to interpersonal harm, which in turn are associated with higher rates of cyberbullying perpetration (Kuai, 2024). Parental monitoring and emotional responsiveness play a buffering role, as highlighted by Zhang (2024), who found that adolescents with low parental involvement were more susceptible to cyberbullying victimization and subsequent emotional distress (Zhang, 2024). Given these findings, it is plausible to hypothesize that adolescents with high RS may be especially reactive to cyberbullying experiences, interpreting them not merely as isolated incidents but as deeply personal rejections that fuel avoidance of social interactions.

Taken together, the literature supports a multidimensional framework in which social withdrawal among adolescents is best understood through the joint consideration of external stressors such as cyberbullying and internal psychological vulnerabilities such as rejection sensitivity. While each of these factors individually contributes to social disconnection, their interaction may intensify risk and limit adolescents' ability to maintain social engagement. This study aims to empirically investigate the predictive roles of cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity on social withdrawal in a Malaysian adolescent sample.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational descriptive design to examine the predictive roles of cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity on social withdrawal among adolescents. A total of 424 participants were selected based on the sample size determination table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), ensuring sufficient statistical power. The participants were secondary school students from various regions in Malaysia, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across age, gender, and school type. Inclusion criteria consisted of being between 13 and 18 years of age, enrolled in a full-time secondary education program, and providing informed consent to participate in the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social Withdrawal

Social withdrawal was assessed using the Social Withdrawal subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), developed by Achenbach and Rescorla (2001). This instrument is widely recognized for evaluating behavioral and emotional problems in children and adolescents aged 6–18 years. The Social Withdrawal subscale specifically captures patterns of avoidance, isolation, and reluctance to engage in social activities. It includes 8 items such as "Rather be alone than with others" and "Withdrawn, doesn't get involved with others," rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true). Higher scores indicate greater levels of social withdrawal. Numerous studies have confirmed the CBCL's high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically > .80) and construct validity across diverse cultural contexts.

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2.2.2. *Cyberbullying Exposure*

Cyberbullying exposure was measured using the European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire (ECIPQ), developed by Del Rey, Casas, and Ortega-Ruiz (2015). This validated instrument assesses both victimization and perpetration experiences related to cyberbullying over the previous two months. For the purposes of this study, only the victimization subscale (11 items) was used. Items assess various forms of cyberbullying, such as receiving mean messages or having embarrassing photos posted online, with responses rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (More than once a week). The ECIPQ has demonstrated good psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values for the victimization scale typically above .85, and its validity has been supported in multiple international studies.

2.2.3. *Rejection Sensitivity*

Rejection sensitivity was measured using the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) originally developed by Downey and Feldman (1996). This instrument assesses anxious expectations and perceptions of rejection in interpersonal contexts. The RSQ presents 18 hypothetical scenarios involving potential rejection (e.g., asking a friend for help), and participants rate their concern about rejection (1 = very unconcerned to 6 = very concerned) and their expectation of acceptance (1 = very unlikely to 6 = very likely). A composite rejection sensitivity score is calculated by multiplying concern and expectation (reverse-scored) ratings for each item and averaging across all items. The RSQ has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > .80) and predictive validity in both adolescent and adult populations.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant demographics. To assess the relationships between the dependent variable (social withdrawal) and each independent variable (cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity), Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated. Following this, a standard multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity on social withdrawal. All assumptions of linear regression, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity, were tested prior to analysis.

3. Findings and Results

The sample consisted of 424 secondary school students from Malaysia, including 229 females (54.01%) and 195 males (45.99%). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years (M = 15.43, SD = 1.62). In terms of school type, 267 participants (62.97%) were enrolled in public schools, while 157 participants (37.03%) attended private institutions. Additionally, 218 students (51.42%) reported daily internet usage exceeding four hours, indicating high digital engagement, whereas the remaining 206 students (48.58%) reported lower daily usage.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 424)

Variable	M	SD
Social Withdrawal	14.72	4.51
Cyberbullying Exposure	21.38	6.82
Rejection Sensitivity	73.45	12.96

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for social withdrawal was 14.72 (SD = 4.51), indicating a moderate level of avoidance behaviors among participants. Cyberbullying exposure had a mean of 21.38 (SD = 6.82), suggesting moderate to high variability in victimization experiences. Rejection sensitivity exhibited a higher mean of 73.45 (SD = 12.96), indicating substantial individual differences in sensitivity to interpersonal rejection among adolescents.

Before conducting the regression analysis, key assumptions were evaluated and met. The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the dependent variable (social withdrawal) was approximately normally distributed (W = 0.984, p = 0.057). Scatterplots and partial regression plots confirmed linear relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Homoscedasticity was verified through examination of standardized residuals, which showed no discernible pattern. The Durbin-Watson statistic

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was 1.91, indicating independence of residuals. Furthermore, multicollinearity diagnostics revealed tolerance values above 0.60 and variance inflation factors (VIFs) below 1.65, suggesting no multicollinearity issues among the predictors.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Social Withdrawal and Predictor Variables

Variables	1. Social Withdrawal	2. Cyberbullying Exposure	3. Rejection Sensitivity
1. Social Withdrawal	—	.41** (p < .01)	.52** (p < .01)
2. Cyberbullying Exposure	.41** (p < .01)	—	.39** (p < .01)
3. Rejection Sensitivity	.52** (p < .01)	.39** (p < .01)	—

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables. Social withdrawal was positively and significantly correlated with both cyberbullying exposure ($r = .41$, $p < .01$) and rejection sensitivity ($r = .52$, $p < .01$). Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that higher levels of cyberbullying victimization and rejection sensitivity are associated with increased social withdrawal.

Table 3

ANOVA Summary for Multiple Linear Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p
Regression	3185.26	2	1592.63	.58	.34	.34	109.72	< .001
Residual	6116.87	421	14.53					
Total	9302.13	423						

The results in Table 3 indicate that the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 421) = 109.72$, $p < .001$. The model explained 34% of the variance in social withdrawal ($R^2 = .34$, Adjusted $R^2 = .34$), suggesting that cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity together significantly predict the outcome variable.

Table 4

Coefficients of Multiple Linear Regression Model Predicting Social Withdrawal

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	3.27	1.01	—	3.24	< .01
Cyberbullying Exposure	0.21	0.04	.28	5.25	< .001
Rejection Sensitivity	0.17	0.02	.41	7.88	< .001

As shown in Table 4, both predictors made significant contributions to the model. Cyberbullying exposure significantly predicted social withdrawal ($B = 0.21$, $\beta = .28$, $t = 5.25$, $p < .001$), indicating that with each unit increase in cyberbullying exposure, social withdrawal increases by 0.21 units. Rejection sensitivity was also a strong and significant predictor ($B = 0.17$, $\beta = .41$, $t = 7.88$, $p < .001$), accounting for a larger share of the variance. These results support the hypothesis that both cyberbullying and rejection sensitivity are key contributors to social withdrawal in adolescents.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that both cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity are significantly and positively correlated with social withdrawal among adolescents. Moreover, linear regression analysis showed that both variables were significant predictors of social withdrawal, with rejection sensitivity contributing slightly more variance than cyberbullying exposure. These results confirm the central hypothesis that internal psychological dispositions and external social stressors interact to shape behavioral avoidance tendencies during adolescence.

The positive relationship between cyberbullying exposure and social withdrawal supports the extensive body

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of literature emphasizing the damaging consequences of online aggression on adolescent psychosocial functioning. Adolescents who are repeatedly exposed to cyberbullying often experience a heightened sense of vulnerability, emotional insecurity, and fear of judgment, which may lead them to withdraw from peer interactions as a form of self-protection (Vatansever et al., 2023). Unlike traditional bullying, which may be confined to specific environments like school, cyberbullying is inescapable and pervasive, occurring across multiple digital platforms and potentially extending into all hours of the day. This persistent exposure increases perceived social threat, which in turn fosters withdrawal tendencies in victims who perceive avoidance as a means of minimizing harm.

The results are consistent with findings by Zhang (2024), who noted that the frequency and perceived severity of online victimization significantly impact adolescents' social behaviors, particularly in terms of reduced face-to-face engagement and lowered participation in group activities (Zhang, 2024). The psychological impact of cyberbullying is not merely temporary but has longer-term implications for emotional regulation and peer bonding. This aligns with prior observations that prolonged digital victimization predicts not only social avoidance but also depressive symptoms, anxiety, and academic disengagement (Jiang et al., 2020).

The second major finding—that rejection sensitivity independently and strongly predicts social withdrawal—further reinforces the role of cognitive-affective vulnerabilities in shaping behavioral outcomes in adolescence. Adolescents high in rejection sensitivity are more likely to anticipate and overinterpret social rejection, even in ambiguous or neutral interactions. As a result, they may adopt social withdrawal as a protective mechanism to preempt anticipated exclusion or criticism. This dispositional hypersensitivity has been highlighted in previous work by Li and Junyan (2022), who characterized rejection sensitivity as a core personality trait that primes individuals to respond maladaptively to relational threats (Li & Junyan, 2022).

Moreover, these findings align with prior research by Hafner et al. (2019), which demonstrated that individuals high in rejection sensitivity tend to exhibit emotional dysregulation and avoidance behaviors following real or perceived rejection events (Hafner et al., 2019). Similarly, Kraines et al. (2018) found that rejection-sensitive individuals show selective attention toward threatening facial expressions and respond with heightened anxiety and social inhibition (Kraines et al., 2018). These studies provide compelling evidence that rejection sensitivity operates through both perceptual and affective channels, amplifying perceived interpersonal danger and reinforcing withdrawal tendencies.

The observed predictive value of rejection sensitivity over and above cyberbullying exposure also deserves consideration. While cyberbullying represents an external and situational stressor, rejection sensitivity reflects a chronic, trait-like disposition. The latter may thus have more pervasive effects across a variety of contexts—online and offline—by altering the way individuals process social information. This conceptualization is supported by Dorfman and Grossmann's (2020) work, which suggests that rejection-sensitive individuals not only experience stronger emotional responses to rejection but also show impaired cognitive flexibility in managing interpersonal conflict, ultimately favoring social disengagement (Dorfman et al., 2020). Furthermore, Denehey (2023) demonstrated that insecurely attached individuals with high rejection sensitivity often engage in distancing behaviors in romantic and platonic relationships alike, preferring solitude to the risk of exclusion (Denehey, 2023).

Interestingly, when examined together in the regression model, cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity explained a meaningful proportion of the variance in social withdrawal, indicating an additive and possibly synergistic effect. Adolescents who are both high in rejection sensitivity and exposed to cyberbullying may experience compounded stress, interpreting each incident of online victimization as deeply personal and indicative of their social undesirability. Such individuals are not only more reactive to rejection but also more likely to encounter it due to maladaptive behavioral patterns, creating a feedback loop of social exclusion and withdrawal. As noted by Balaya and Sündermann (2024), heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection based on physical appearance or ethnicity often co-occurs with anxious withdrawal and maladaptive coping strategies in youth (Balaya & Sündermann, 2024).

This interactional view also resonates with findings from Andrews et al. (2022), who developed measures to distinguish between online and offline rejection sensitivity. Their work highlighted that digital rejection experiences can be equally potent in triggering avoidance behaviors, especially among adolescents whose self-worth is tightly bound to social media validation (Andrews et al., 2022). The convergence of these two domains—cyberbullying exposure and rejection sensitivity—presents a unique challenge in the

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digital era, where interpersonal evaluations occur in both real-time and asynchronous formats, amplifying the effects of perceived rejection.

Biological and neurological evidence also complements this psychosocial interpretation. Gong et al. (2024) identified hormonal and genetic correlates of rejection sensitivity, particularly the role of salivary testosterone and polymorphisms in social cognition genes, suggesting a neuroendocrine basis for heightened reactivity to rejection (Gong et al., 2024). Although this study did not assess biological markers, such findings emphasize the multifactorial roots of withdrawal behavior and highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in future research.

Further expanding the contextual dimension, Charoensukmongkol (2023) emphasized the role of organizational politics and individual political skill in mediating responses to workplace cyberbullying. Although his study focused on adults, the underlying principle—that individual traits interact with environmental stressors to produce specific behavioral outcomes—applies equally well to adolescents in school settings (Charoensukmongkol, 2023). Similarly, Sigler (2024) introduced the concept of rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD), a condition often associated with ADHD and characterized by overwhelming emotional responses to rejection cues. While RSD was not assessed in the current study, the severe emotional reactivity described aligns closely with the behavioral outcomes observed among adolescents with elevated RS scores (Sigler, 2024).

Finally, this study contributes to the understanding of psychological vulnerabilities in the Malaysian adolescent context, which remains underrepresented in global mental health literature. Given cultural norms surrounding collectivism and emotional restraint in many Asian societies, social withdrawal may be both a symptom and a culturally reinforced coping strategy in response to perceived peer disapproval. Murphy (2019) emphasized that individual personality traits, including emotional instability and neuroticism, exacerbate rejection sensitivity and its behavioral consequences, particularly in cultures where interpersonal harmony is highly valued (Murphy, 2019).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the significant findings, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of self-report measures may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracy, particularly in assessing cyberbullying experiences. Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; while cyberbullying and rejection sensitivity predict social withdrawal, the directionality of these relationships cannot be firmly established. Third, the sample, though adequate in size, was confined to Malaysian secondary school students, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or age groups. Additionally, unmeasured variables such as parental attachment, social support, or comorbid mental health symptoms could confound the observed relationships. Finally, the study did not explore the potential interaction effect between cyberbullying and rejection sensitivity, which could yield deeper insights into their combined impact.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to better understand the causal pathways between cyberbullying exposure, rejection sensitivity, and social withdrawal. It would be beneficial to examine the mediating roles of emotion regulation, self-esteem, or depressive symptoms in these relationships. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or diary studies, could enrich the understanding of adolescents' lived experiences and contextual responses to online rejection. Cross-cultural comparative studies may also reveal how societal norms, family dynamics, and digital literacy shape vulnerability to cyberbullying and its psychological consequences. Additionally, integrating biological and neurological assessments, as suggested by existing literature, could offer a more holistic understanding of the cognitive-affective mechanisms driving social withdrawal.

From a practical perspective, the results underscore the need for comprehensive interventions that address both environmental and psychological risk factors. Schools should implement anti-cyberbullying programs that promote digital empathy, conflict resolution, and reporting mechanisms. At the same time, psychoeducational workshops can help students recognize and manage rejection sensitivity through cognitive-behavioral strategies and emotion regulation training. Mental health practitioners should assess rejection sensitivity in adolescents presenting with social withdrawal, as early identification may enable more targeted therapeutic approaches. Finally, involving parents and teachers in awareness initiatives could foster supportive environments that buffer adolescents from the negative effects of both online victimization and internal vulnerabilities.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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