The Mediating Role of Brand Image in the Relationship Between Fan Engagement and Fans' Attitudinal and Behavioral Loyalty

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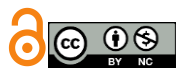
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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between fan engagement and fans' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Methodology: In this correlational study, the statistical population consisted of fans of the Iranian Premier Football League. Among them, four teams (Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractor, and Sepahan) were selected as the top four teams of the 2019-2020 season. Given the unlimited size of the statistical population, stratified random sampling was employed, and the sample size was determined to be 258 individuals. Data were collected using the Fan Engagement with Brand Questionnaire by Desar (2017), the Team Brand by Bauer et al. (2008), and Fan Loyalty, including Attitudinal Loyalty and Behavioral Loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Wang et al., 2011). Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling were used for data analysis.

Findings: Fan engagement influences the team's brand image, and brand image affects both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. This study also demonstrated that brand image plays a mediating role in the relationship between fan engagement with the brand and fans' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Conclusion: The present study contributes to filling the gap in sports marketing literature by providing a better understanding of what contributes to fan loyalty for professional football teams in the Iranian Premier League. Building on existing sports marketing literature, the model developed in this study enables sports managers to comprehensively measure the relationships between fan engagement, team brand image, attitudinal loyalty, and behavioral loyalty.

Keywords: *Brand Image, Fan Engagement, Fans' Attitudinal Loyalty, Fans' Behavioral Loyalty.*

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1   Introduction

One of the most valuable assets of sports clubs, such as football clubs, is their brand. The logo and colors of top football teams can even be considered among the most prominent brand symbols of a country (Ahearne et al., 2005). A thorough review of the sports marketing literature reveals that increasing attention has been paid to sports consumers due to the unique relationships these individuals have with their favorite teams (Ahmad et al., 2017). In fact, sports fans are one of the most important groups of sports consumers, whose strong passion for fandom, team identity, and emotional attachment to sports clubs is often referred to as fan engagement in sports marketing literature (Choi & Ahluwalia, 2013). Brand engagement indicates that the more actively a fan follows and interacts with their favorite club's brand, the more loyal they will be, and this loyalty will be demonstrated through repeated support for their favorite team (Barreda et al., 2016).

Having fans who officially declare their attachment and loyalty is considered the most important asset, and a strong brand and favorable brand image in the minds of fans increase their loyalty to the team and athlete, as well as their purchase of related products (Bauer et al., 2008). Fans are often attracted when their favorite team wins matches. However, winning in sports is not guaranteed, and football clubs must seek strategies to ensure fan support even when the team does not perform well on the field. Therefore, many football brands are striving to become more fan-centric (Behnam et al., 2021).

The relationship between fan engagement and the attitudinal and behavioral loyalty of sports fans is very important and complex. Fan engagement, defined as the continuous participation and connection with their favorite team or sports club, can play a key role in forming and strengthening their loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a fan's mental and emotional commitment to the team (Bilgihan et al., 2016). This type of loyalty often results from positive and meaningful interactions between the fan and the team, such as participating in team events, following related news and media, or even direct communications with players and staff. These interactions can strengthen fans' sense of belonging and identity, leading them to remain mentally loyal to the team even when it does not perform well (Biscaia et al., 2016). On the other hand, behavioral loyalty refers to the practical and objective actions of fans in support of the team, such as purchasing match tickets, buying team merchandise, or regularly attending stadiums. Fan engagement with the team through joint activities and participation in team events can increase this type of loyalty. For instance, a fan who regularly attends games or actively engages with the team's content on social media is more likely to consistently support the team (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011).

Ultimately, fan engagement with the team can act as a bridge between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The more meaningful and extensive the engagement, the higher the likelihood that fans will remain loyal to the team both mentally and practically. Therefore, creating more opportunities for fan engagement with the team can help strengthen both types of loyalty, resulting in stronger and more sustainable support for the team (Brodie et al., 2013).

Brand image plays a crucial role as a mediator in the relationship between fan engagement and the attitudinal and behavioral loyalty of sports fans. When fans interact with a sports team, the brand image that forms in their minds can significantly influence the development and reinforcement of their loyalty. Initially, fan engagement with the team can impact the team's brand image (Cheung et al., 2020). Positive experiences in interacting with the team, such as good experiences at the stadium, respectful and professional behavior from players, and the quality of the team's communication content, can lead to the formation of a strong and positive brand image. This positive brand image, in turn, enhances fans' feelings and attitudes towards the team and contributes to the development of attitudinal loyalty (Choi & Ahluwalia, 2013). In other words, if fans have a positive image of the team, they are more likely to remain attitudinally loyal to the team. On the other hand, brand image can also act as a mediator to strengthen the impact of fan engagement on behavioral loyalty (Cifci & Erdogan, 2016). When fans have a positive image of the team's brand, this image can motivate them to participate in team activities and practically support the team. For example, a fan who views the team as a respectable and reputable brand is more likely to purchase tickets, team products, and participate in team events. This type of behavioral loyalty can directly stem from a positive brand image created through continuous and positive interactions with the team (Coelho et al., 2018). As a result, brand image as a mediator can enhance the relationship between fan engagement and their loyalty. This means that positive interactions with the team, through the creation of a strong and positive brand image, can more effectively promote both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty among fans (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Therefore, teams and sports clubs should not only focus on direct

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interactions with fans but also consistently work on their brand image to reinforce fan loyalty in all dimensions (Barreda et al., 2016). Given the importance of the subject and the lack of comprehensive research on the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between fan engagement and attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, this study seeks to answer the question of whether brand image mediates the relationship between fan engagement and fans' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

2   Methods and Materials

2.1   *Study Design and Participants*

The study employed a correlational design and structural equation modeling (SEM). The research population consisted of fans of the Iranian Premier Football League. Among them, four teams (Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractor, and Sepahan) were selected as the top four teams of the 2019-2020 season. Given the unlimited size of the statistical population, stratified random sampling was employed, and the sample size was determined to be 258 individuals. The questionnaire is one of the most common tools for data collection in descriptive research, and it assesses the opinions, perspectives, and insights of respondents using specific scales. In this study, standardized questionnaires were utilized.

2.2   *Data Collection Tools*

The Fan Engagement with Brand questionnaire, based on Desar's (2017) framework, was used to measure fan engagement. This questionnaire measures fan engagement through the dimensions of community (4 items) and brand (2 items) (Rahmani et al., 2024) on a five-point Likert scale.

To assess the team brand image, 12 questions from Bauer et al. (2008) were used. This questionnaire measures non-product-related attributes (including logo and color, club history and tradition, modern stadium, and fans) with three questions each on a five-point Likert scale (Bauer et al., 2008).

Fan loyalty, including attitudinal loyalty (four items) and behavioral loyalty (three items) (Bauer et al., 2008), was measured using a five-point Likert scale. All questionnaire items were close-ended and presented in multiple-choice format, allowing respondents to select their answers quickly and easily, while also facilitating the efficient extraction of data.

2.3   *Data Analysis*

For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical approaches were employed. In the descriptive statistics section, measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, and distribution shape were used, while in the inferential statistics section, Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling (SEM) were utilized. It is important to note that all statistical analyses were conducted with a 5% error margin using SPSS version 23 and Smart PLS version 3.2.6.

3   Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, all variables fall significantly below the range threshold (5 or 2.5). Therefore, according to this criterion, the condition of no multicollinearity among constructs is met. Based on this, the assumption of multicollinearity (lack of independence) among variables is rejected, indicating that the research variables are independent and meet the necessary condition for regression estimation.

Table 1

Multicollinearity Assessment of Factor Analysis Model

Construct	Team Brand Image	Fan Engagement	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty
Team Brand Image	-	-	1.13	1.13
Fan Engagement	1.00	-	2.92	2.92

According to the results in Table 2, engagement, brand image, and identity together explain 46% and 38% of the variance in attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, respectively.

Table 2

Explained Variance of the Model

Construct	R-squared	Adjusted R-squared
Team Brand Image	0.09	0.08
Behavioral Loyalty	0.46	0.46
Attitudinal Loyalty	0.37	0.38

After reviewing various indicators related to the assessment of each section of structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate the overall model, several criteria were introduced. One of these criteria is the goodness-of-fit index, known as the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), used in variance-based SEM. The acceptable range for this index is between 0.08 and 0.10. According to the results in Table 3, regarding the overall assessment of the empirical model in this study, it can be stated that in addition to confirming the goodness-of-fit indices and quality control evaluation in various items, the empirical data in this research also support the proposed model. Overall, the results of evaluating all the credible model fit indices indicate that the factor structure considered has a high quality in terms of model quality indicators. Therefore, the factor structure considered has a strong capacity for testing the research hypotheses.

Table 3

Model Fit Summary

Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.08	0.08
dULS	2.60	4.08
d_G	0.74	0.89
NFI	0.77	0.75

Based on Table 4, as well as Figure 1, the path coefficient with a value of 0.30 and a t-value greater than 1.96 (t = 4.27) and a significance level of less than 0.05 (p < 0.05) indicates a positive and significant ability of the independent variable, fan engagement, in predicting the dependent variable, team brand image. Additionally, the results show that the path coefficient with a value of 0.25 and a t-value greater than 1.96 (t = 2.77) and a significance level of less than 0.05 (p < 0.05) indicates a positive and significant ability of the independent variable, fan engagement, in predicting the dependent variable, attitudinal loyalty. Similarly, the path coefficient with a value of 0.31 and a t-value greater than 1.96 (t = 3.68) and a significance level of less than 0.05 (p < 0.05) indicates a positive and significant ability of the independent variable, fan engagement, in predicting the dependent variable, behavioral loyalty. Furthermore, the path coefficient with a value of 0.16 and a t-value greater than 1.96 (t = 2.54) and a significance level of less than 0.05 (p < 0.05) indicates a positive and significant ability of the independent variable, team brand image, in predicting the dependent variable, attitudinal loyalty. Lastly, the path coefficient with a value of 0.21 and a t-value greater than 1.96 (t = 2.86) and a significance level of less than 0.05 (p < 0.05) indicates a positive and significant ability of the independent variable, team brand image, in predicting the dependent variable, behavioral loyalty.
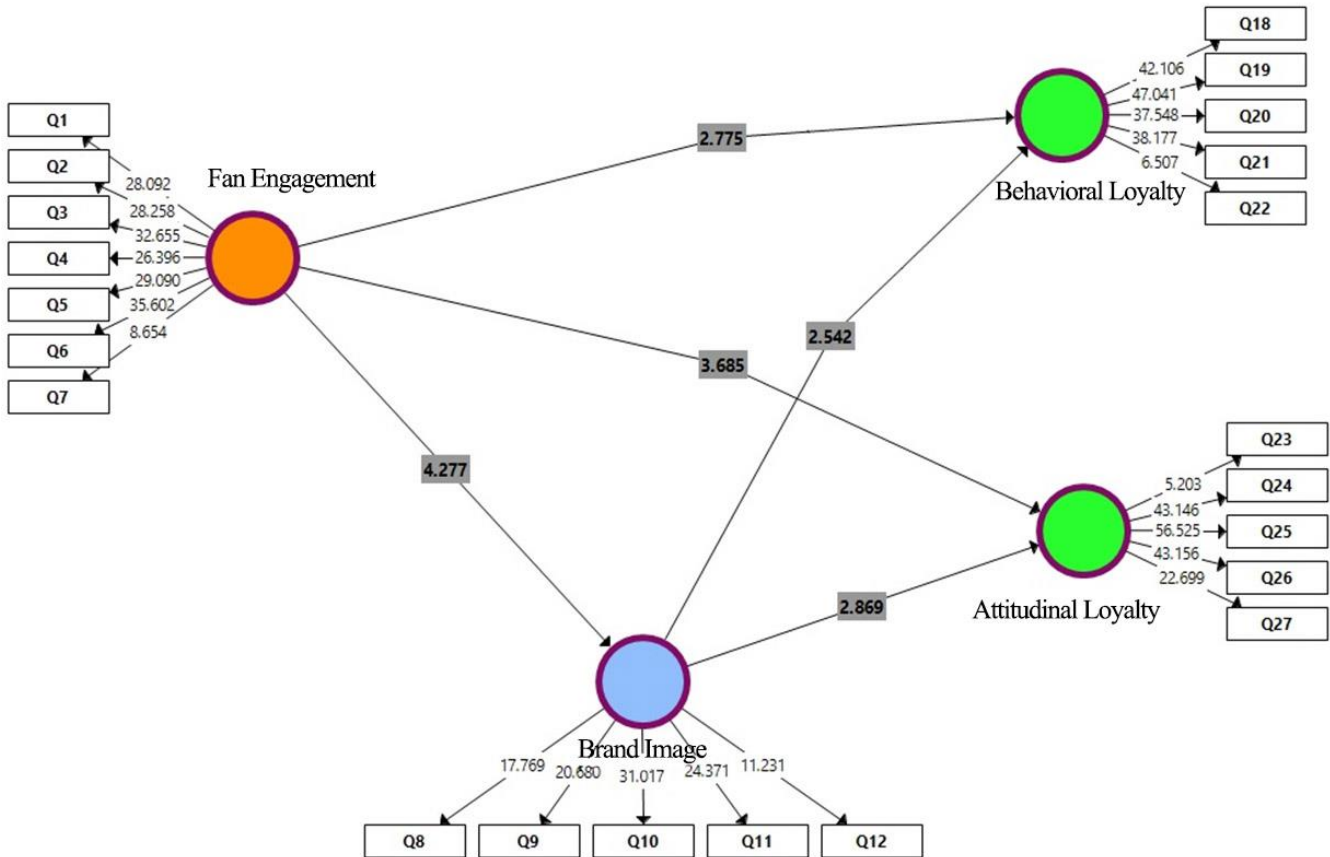
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Figure 1

Model with T-values

Table 4

Results of Path Analysis Between Variables

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-value	Significance Level (p)
Fan Engagement -> Team Brand Image	0.30	4.27	0.000
Fan Engagement -> Attitudinal Loyalty	0.25	2.77	0.006
Fan Engagement -> Behavioral Loyalty	0.31	3.68	0.000
Team Brand Image -> Attitudinal Loyalty	0.16	2.54	0.011
Team Brand Image -> Behavioral Loyalty	0.21	2.86	0.004

As seen in Table 5, except for two indirect paths that have a value of less than 0.96, other indirect hypotheses are confirmed. Specifically, the paths with two mediators are confirmed.

Table 5

Evaluation of Indirect Paths

Path	t-value	p-value	Path Coefficient
Fan Engagement -> Team Brand Image -> Behavioral Loyalty	2.333	0.020	0.067
Fan Engagement -> Team Brand Image -> Attitudinal Loyalty	2.165	0.031	0.049
Fan Engagement -> Team Brand Image -> Behavioral Loyalty	2.333	0.020	0.067

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4   Discussion and Conclusion

One of the important findings of this study is that fan engagement has a positive and significant impact on the team's brand image. This result is consistent with prior findings (Ahmad et al., 2017; Choi & Ahluwalia, 2013). Ahmad et al. (2017) found that fans with higher engagement levels are more likely to have a stronger and more stable image of their team, whereas less engaged fans may consider alternative entertainment options, especially if they perceive the team to suffer from poor stadium conditions or inappropriate fan behavior (Ahearne et al., 2005). Fans with a positive image of their team are also more inclined to engage in word-of-mouth promotion and increased purchasing behavior. Sports marketers can also use fan engagement tools to manage brand perceptions effectively. In fact, engagement is a form of voluntary physical, cognitive, and emotional participation by fans, which generates feedback that enhances brand image as added value.

Brand image is the perception and acceptance imagined by fans. This image is developed and dependent on the possibilities for engagement, relationship development, and community experiences. Fans may demonstrate varying levels of fandom, from merely attending games to considering the team's victories and losses as their own. However, the degree of enthusiasm and emotional importance distinguishes a passionate fan from a mere spectator. Engaging with a favorite team allows sports organizations to strengthen relationships with fans, transforming consumers into brand owners and collaborators, including club brands, thereby playing a powerful role in building brand reputation and image. Sports clubs should seize opportunities to increase fan engagement. Understanding which brand features play a role in fan engagement is critical for creating the right perceptions of the team's brand. Paying attention to fan associations to create strong attachments in fans is an example of appropriate team actions.

Another finding of this study is that fan engagement has a positive and significant impact on attitudinal loyalty. This finding aligns with prior findings (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Doyle et al., 2013). Consumer engagement is a precursor to attitudinal loyalty. However, more than 40% of definitions in the literature describe engagement as a unidimensional concept, with the behavioral aspect being predominant. Engagement in a relationship is not only demonstrated by

behavior but also by attitudes and the reasons why this behavior occurs. Based on research in the field of attitudes, an individual's behavior is determined by their intention to perform it. In organizational behavior literature, employee engagement is positively associated with an individual's attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Brand engagement creates more favorable attitudes towards a product, company, or brand, which then strengthens the psychological process and increases the likelihood of positive behavioral responses. In this context, brand loyalty reflects a consumer's positive attitude towards a brand, in addition to repeated purchase behavior.

Thus, it is expected that positive attitudes will be formed in consumers who engage with a brand and/or service provider compared to consumers who do not engage with the brand or provider. Such favorable attitudes may lead to increased loyalty and/or intention to support. Club managers should also invest in relationships with their fans as sports consumers to create strong engagement between them and the brand. These investments can be directed towards social media sites, responses to user activities such as responding to user posts, fan forums, and creating more opportunities for fan engagement.

The results of this study also showed that fan engagement has a positive and significant impact on behavioral loyalty. This research finding is consistent with the results of Du et al. (2007). Engaged consumers are inclined to establish strong bonds and high levels of engagement with the organization. Consumers, through these interactive processes, develop a close connection with the organization. This bond encourages consumers to reuse services. By expanding the outcomes of consumer engagement through other consumer loyalty behaviors, a committed consumer creates a deep and enduring bond with the brand, adopting an active role in the club, and chooses to use services as a form of behavior. Du et al. (2007) also confirmed the effect of engagement level on consumer loyalty, stating that committed consumers enhance behavioral loyalty through repeat purchases and re-attendance behaviors (Du et al., 2007).

Furthermore, when consumers evaluate their interactions with a brand or organization, they may perceive value based on memorable and personal experiences and their relationship with it. This may ultimately lead to brand loyalty. Sometimes fan engagement in sports is manifested in sharing their experiences and opinions about their team; therefore, the spirit of sharing experiences and interaction within the fan community can be influential in creating the

desired brand value. The profitability of organizations depends on their behavioral or attitudinal loyalty. Therefore, the impacts of consumer engagement on consumer behavior are significant. Managers should seek mechanisms to create and maintain consumer loyalty through increased engagement. Thus, football sports clubs should carefully develop their actions to engage with fans to increase behavioral loyalty.

Another result of this study was the significant relationship between brand image and attitudinal loyalty. The findings of the present study align with prior findings (Durmaz & Vildan, 2016), who emphasized that marketers should focus on the benefits of brand image to achieve consumer loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty reflects fans' internal attachment to their team and distinguishes between "false" loyalty and "true" loyalty. False loyalty characterizes a sports spectator who does not have a strong positive attitude but still frequently watches games. Commitment is generally defined as an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand. Therefore, if fans have a deep internal attachment to their favorite team and if their commitment remains stable over time and resistant to criticism, they exhibit a high level of psychological commitment.

The more familiar consumers are with a brand and the more they trust it, the more favorable their attitudes towards that product will be. Since brand image can be divided into functional, symbolic, and experiential images, these images directly influence consumers' brand attitudes. One promising strategy for sports marketers to steer consumer preferences and loyalty is to create strong, positive, and unique consumer beliefs about the club. In other words, creating a strong brand image for the team brand can play a crucial role in influencing fans' preferences and perceptions of the club and differentiating it from rival clubs and other leisure activities. The brand image has the potential to represent one of the few constants in fan perception; therefore, the brand image provides sports marketers with a unique opportunity to present a consistent and stable club appearance to fans and the general public.

The managerial implications of this study indicate that football sports clubs can improve trust and positive feelings towards the team by enhancing factors related to the brand image, which subsequently improves attitudinal loyalty.

Based on the research results, team brand image has a positive and significant impact on behavioral loyalty. The findings of the present study align with prior studies (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Doyle et al., 2013). Brand image is a critical factor that drives consumer purchasing behavior.

Non-product-related attributes (stadium, club history and tradition, fans, etc.) serve as factors of brand image that create a strong identity in the consumer. The team and its environment, as one of the non-product-related attributes, create a literal and metaphorical home where rituals and traditions are performed. Therefore, for fans who attend games, the stadium can play a significant role in creating positive associations with future continued attendance. Brand heritage refers to the past of the brand (its elements) and may be useful in differentiating and positioning offerings, along with facilitating attachment and commitment to the brand and influencing purchase intentions.

Recent sports marketing research shows that invoking the heritage of a sports team can create a positive attitude towards the sports team, its sponsorship, and the sponsor's brand. Therefore, focusing on brand image can enable the club to increase the financial or commercial value derived from the brand image and, subsequently, enhance economic success. Thus, clubs that focus on the team brand image can foster a greater willingness in fans to pay attention to teams with stronger brands. Therefore, club management should aim to increase loyalty among their fan base by fostering connections with other fans and nurturing the team's traditions. For example, this can be achieved by enhancing the club museum or organizing fan competitions in the stadium or sports venue.

Finally, the study's results showed that the team brand image positively and significantly mediates the relationship between fan engagement and both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The results are consistent with prior findings (Ahmad et al., 2017; Choi & Ahluwalia, 2013). Consumers play a major role in creating meaning for brands, especially brands like professional football, which are considered leisure brands. Fan and brand interactions are a set of engagements that go beyond financial transactions, accompanied by the exchange of ideas and emotions about the brand and experiences related to the brand or other fans. A particularly interesting aspect is the important role of the consumer in constructing the brand experience and meaning for leisure brands, such as professional football. It seems that brand engagement encompasses a series of brand-related interactions beyond financial transactions, involving the sharing and exchange of ideas, thoughts, and emotions about brand experiences with other brand consumers. The interaction between consumers and brands that occurs during the engagement process serves as an entry point in

shaping brand image, as engaging with consumers increases brand visibility and enhances brand image.

Increasing interactions can help strengthen consumers' cognitive understanding of the brand's attributes and benefits, leading to a stronger brand image. Thus, the experience provided by consumer interactions helps create an emotional connection with consumers, which fosters brand loyalty. Consequently, consumer loyalty to the brand can be enhanced by strengthening the brand image, engaging consumers with the brand, and involving them in brand-related communities.

This study contributes to filling the gap in sports marketing literature by providing a better understanding of what contributes to fan loyalty for professional football teams in the Iranian Premier League. Building on existing sports marketing literature, the model developed in this study enables sports managers to comprehensively measure the relationships between fan engagement, team brand image, attitudinal loyalty, and behavioral loyalty. This study enhances our understanding of why Premier League fans are committed to a team and exhibit fan-related behaviors, concluding that fan engagement influences the team's brand image, which, in turn, affects attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The study also demonstrated that brand image mediates the relationship between fan engagement and both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

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.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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