



## Predicting Emotional Divorce Based on Differentiation with the Mediation of Communication Patterns

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The current study aimed to predict emotional divorce based on differentiation with the mediation of communication patterns among women attending counseling and psychology centers.

**Methods and Materials:** The present study quantitative research. The research design is descriptive-correlational, conducted using path analysis method. The study population consisted of women experiencing emotional divorce visiting counseling and psychology centers (both private and public) in District 2 of Tehran in the year 2020. A total of 368 individuals were selected using convenience sampling method and responded to the Gottman Emotional Divorce questionnaire (2008), the Skowron and Friedlander Differentiation Scale (1998), and the Christensen and Sullaway Communication Patterns Questionnaire (1984). The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling.

**Findings:** According to the results, the direct path coefficients of differentiation and communication patterns to the emotional divorce of married women are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The direct path coefficients from differentiation to constructive reciprocal communication and avoidant reciprocal communication are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results of the bootstrap test indicate the significance of the indirect pathways between these variables. This result indicates the significance of the mediating role of communication patterns in the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results showed that constructive reciprocal communication, avoidant reciprocal communication, and expectation/withdrawal communication mediate the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce.

**Keywords:** Emotional divorce, Differentiation, Communication patterns.

### 1. Introduction

The role of the family as the smallest social unit and its various functions can be very important and influential

both in its positive aspect, namely creating a center of calm, and in its negative aspect, namely creating social harm. Among the negative aspects arising from within this social institution is the emergence of a phenomenon known as

divorce (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Hedayatimoghadam & Bakhshipour, 2022). For married couples, divorce is considered a decision made after considering countless factors (Shahmoradi et al., 2021). The decision to divorce is the result of excessive internal stress triggers for a couple, which may be influenced by unmet needs or goals, weak coping styles in managing life events, or an inability to establish proper communication and convey feelings to the other person (Parisuz et al., 2019; Salehpour et al., 2020). Divorce can be divided into two categories: overt divorce, where the couple formally separates by going to court, and covert divorce, where the couple lives together out of necessity and compulsion, also known as emotional or silent divorce. Emotional divorce describes a relationship where the spouses seem good and intimate in social settings, but in private, they cannot tolerate each other; emotional divorce emerges not as a temporary disorder in marital life but as a stable situation (Habibi et al., 2022; Talaezadeh et al., 2023). Typically, couples form a relationship hoping for warm interactions, but in reality, emotional relationships often start with a certain passion but fade over time due to ignorance and negligence of one or both parties, leading to a gradual cooling of life. According to exploratory studies, this situation may continue to the extent that the couple only shares a roof but does not live together, which is referred to as emotional divorce (Narimani et al., 2021; Poorhejazi et al., 2021; Shahmoradi et al., 2021). Paul Bohannon (1970) considers emotional divorce as the first stage in the divorce process, indicating a marital relationship in decline where feelings of alienation replace intimacy (Hayati & Soleymani, 2019; Nikoogofar & Sangani, 2020). This type of divorce symbolizes the existence of a problem in healthy communication between husband and wife and implies a lack of trust, respect, and affection for each other, where love and affection are replaced by anger, upset, and hatred, and the spouses feel that positive feelings have permanently gone and given way to negative emotions. This type of divorce happens gradually and quietly, often without the couple's awareness, and as the spouses drift apart, the stability of the marriage is endangered (Hedayatimoghadam & Bakhshipour, 2022).

One of the factors that seems to be related to emotional divorce is self-differentiation (Kashefi et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2023). The concept of self-differentiation refers to the ability to experience intimacy with others while remaining emotionally engaged yet independent from other individuals (Işık et al., 2020; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Rodríguez-González et al., 2019). Differentiation is a personality trait

that appears at different levels internally and externally. According to him, internal differentiation is a process occurring within the individual, including components like I-position and emotional reactivity; and external differentiation is a process that occurs in relationships between people, including components like fusion and emotional cutoff with others (Parsakia et al., 2023). From this perspective, I-position means having a clear sense of self and independence in thoughts and beliefs, while emotional reactivity refers to the dominance of individual feelings over reason and logic, and responding based on emotions. At the interpersonal level, fusion with others refers to losing one's independence and merging during intimate relationships, especially with significant others in life. Emotional cutoff is indicative of a sense of threat and vulnerability in relationships and sometimes a tendency to adopt defensive behaviors such as distancing, sudden termination of the relationship, and denial of the relationship's importance with others (Buser et al., 2019; Finzi-Dottan, 2023). In fact, self-differentiation, under the shadow of psychological independence and emotional maturity, is permanent and dynamic, meaning that individuals are constantly striving to maintain their psychological integrity. In the marital system, when couples' differentiation is high, there is a greater likelihood of appropriately adapting to conflicts, and emotional reactions decrease (Akrami et al., 2020; Hajhosseini et al., 2021; Işık et al., 2020; Khosravi et al., 2021; Rahimzadegan & Atadokht, 2020). Undifferentiated couples cannot maintain their individuality and independence from their families of origin, and their marriages are more likely to fail. Differentiated individuals have a clear definition of themselves and their beliefs. They can take greater responsibility in choosing their life directions and maintain self-control in highly emotional situations, making logical and responsible decisions (Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Rafezi & Saboori, 2022; Zamanifar et al., 2022).

The communication pattern of couples, meaning the communication channels through which husband and wife interact with each other. These patterns occur abundantly within a family and form the family's communication network (Abdolmaleki et al., 2023; Amini et al., 2023; Salari Jaeni et al., 2021). The importance of communication patterns is such that it has been described as the cornerstone of the overall well-being of the family, such that disordered communication patterns have a significant effect on the couple's mental health (Danesh et al., 2023; Faal et al., 2019; Salari Jaeni et al., 2021). Defective communication patterns

reduce the couple's correct understanding of each other, prevent spouses from supporting each other, striving to satisfy each other's needs, understanding each other's perspectives on contentious issues, and ultimately causing marital problems and dissatisfaction; in contrast, healthy and constructive communication patterns are considered one of the most important factors in marital satisfaction (Janbozorgi et al., 2020; Narimani et al., 2021; Vahdani et al., 2020).

Therefore, given these factors and the role of identifying factors related to emotional divorce in preventing it, the aim of the current research was to predict emotional divorce based on differentiation with the mediation of communication patterns.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is applied in terms of its objectives and quantitative regarding data gathering. The research design is descriptive-correlational, conducted using path analysis. The study population consisted of women experiencing emotional divorce who were attending counseling and psychology centers (both private and public) in District 2 of Tehran during 2020-2021. A convenience non-random sampling method was used for sample selection. In this type of sampling, individuals are selected based on the relative ease of access to them. Since accurate statistics of women experiencing emotional divorce were not available, those diagnosed with emotional divorce by therapists were selected as samples upon their consent, following visits to counseling and psychology centers in District 2 of Tehran. Considering the correlational nature of the study, the required sample size was estimated at 280 individuals, which increased to 400 to account for a 30% attrition rate. Finally, 368 individuals were selected as the research sample.

Initially, by visiting the website of the Psychology and Counseling Organization, the National Welfare Organization, and the National Youth Organization, and accessing contact numbers and addresses of counseling centers and offices, a telephone contact was established with the centers, and a meeting was requested after discussing with the technical manager and explaining the research objectives. In the meeting, after explaining the ethical principles, technical managers were asked to collaborate by discussing with center counselors and explaining the research goals. Subsequently, by converting questionnaires into electronic formats, they were made available to the

centers, and after completion by participants, the questionnaires were collected.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Emotional Divorce

This questionnaire is taken from John Gottman's book "The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy." Written in 2008, it includes statements about various aspects of life that the respondent may agree or disagree with. This scale has 24 questions and is answered with a yes or no. The more 'yes' answers, the higher the probability of emotional divorce. A score between 0 to 8 indicates a low probability of separation in life. A score between 8 to 16 indicates a medium probability of separation. A score above 16 indicates a strong probability of separation. If the number of 'yes' answers is eight (8) or more, your marital life is at risk of separation, and it is advised to seek expert help. Reliability and Validity: In the research by Mami and Asgari, Cronbach's alpha for the reliability of the questionnaire was mentioned as 83%. The content validity of the questionnaire has been reported as favorable by experts (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023).

#### 2.2.2. Self-Differentiation

This questionnaire, developed by Skowron and Friedlander in 1998, consists of 45 items and includes four subscales: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others, answered on a 6-point Likert scale. The emotional reactivity subscale (11 items) reflects the degree to which a person responds to environmental stimuli with excessive sensitivity or emotional variability. The I-position subscale (11 items) alongside a clear definition of self-sense, determines the loyalty to personal beliefs when forced to act against them. The emotional cutoff subscale (12 items) indicates a fear of intimacy and excessive vulnerability in relationships with others, and the fusion with others subscale (9 items) indicates excessive emotional involvement in relationships. Research results have shown high validity and reliability for this questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha calculated for overall differentiation is .88, and for the subscales respectively .63, .75, .60, .70 (Parsakia et al., 2023).

#### 2.2.3. Communication Patterns

Designed by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) at the University of California, this questionnaire aims to examine

the reciprocal communication patterns of couples. It contains 35 questions rated on a nine-point scale from 'not at all likely' (1) to 'very likely' (9). Christensen and Sullaway (1991) divided the communication patterns of couples into three categories: 1- Constructive reciprocal pattern, 2- Demand/withdraw pattern: This pattern includes two parts: a) demand/withdraw with the man demanding/woman withdrawing, b) demand/withdraw with the woman demanding/man withdrawing, 3- Mutual avoidance pattern. The possible scores range from a minimum of 35 to a maximum of 315. A score between 35 to 75 indicates weak communication patterns of couples. A score between 70 to 175 indicates average communication patterns. A score above 165 indicates strong communication patterns. Higher scores in a component indicate the dominance of that communication pattern among the couple. Christensen and Sullaway (1991) assessed the validity of the three subscales of this questionnaire. In their study, comparing three groups of distressed, non-distressed, and divorcing couples, the constructive reciprocal subscale could distinguish between all three groups, while the mutual avoidance and demand/withdraw subscales could differentiate between distressed and non-distressed couples (Rasouli, 2001). Cronbach's alpha obtained in the studies by Christensen and Heavey (1990) and Heavey et al. (1993) on the five scales of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire ranged from .44 to .85, indicating satisfactory results. Ebdat Pour (2000) estimated Cronbach's alpha for the constructive reciprocal communication pattern (five questions) as .70, mutual avoidance communication as .71, demand/withdraw communication as .66, female demand/male withdraw as

.51, and male demand/female withdraw as .52, and obtained the correlation between these subscales and the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, showing all subscales of the questionnaire correlate with marital satisfaction (Amini et al., 2023).

### 2.3. Data analysis

For the data analysis of the study, descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used. The descriptive statistics section included tables, charts, means, and standard deviations. In the inferential statistics section, Pearson's correlation coefficient and path analysis were utilized following the assumptions of parametric tests. For the final data analysis, AMOS and SPSS software were used.

## 3. Findings and Results

In terms of demographic characteristics, the majority of the sample group's women were aged between 25-35 years (29.4%), mostly homemakers (53.3%), and their spouses were predominantly self-employed (59.5%). Furthermore, the education level of most of the sample group's women (34%) and their spouses (48.6%) was at the bachelor's level. Between 5 to 10 years had passed since most of the sample group's women had married (47.3%), and most reported having between 1 to 3 children (51.1%). Finally, the majority of the sample group's families had a middle socioeconomic status (51.9%). Below, descriptive findings of research variables (positive and negative emotions, communication patterns, and emotional divorce) in the sample group are reported.

**Table 1**

### Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Differentiation (Total Score)	170.86	21.86	106	221
Components of Differentiation				
Emotional Reactivity	42.61	8.52	17	62
I-Position	46.66	6.71	29	63
Emotional Cutoff	40.18	9.83	19	64
Fusion with Others	41.36	6.81	24	61
Communication Patterns (Interactive)				
Constructive Reciprocal Communication	5.48	9.42	-30	23
Avoidant Reciprocal Communication	14.01	5.43	3	27
Demand/Withdraw Communication	27.26	8.87	6	54
Emotional Divorce	16.04	7.13	7	23

According to the results reported in the Table 1, the mean (and standard deviation) of differentiation for the sample group's women was 170.86 (21.86). The highest mean

among the differentiation components for the sample group's women was in the I-position component with a mean (and standard deviation) of 46.66 (6.71), and the lowest was in the

emotional cutoff component with a mean (and standard deviation) of 40.18 (9.83). Regarding communication patterns, the mean (and standard deviation) of constructive reciprocal communication for the sample group's women was 5.48 (9.42), avoidant reciprocal communication was

14.01 (5.43), and demand/withdraw communication was 27.26 (8.87). Finally, the mean (and standard deviation) of emotional divorce for the sample group's women was 16.04 (17.13).

**Table 2**

*Correlation Coefficients between Research Variables*

Variables/Mediators	Constructive Reciprocal Communication	Avoidant Reciprocal Communication	Demand/Withdraw Communication	Emotional Divorce
Differentiation (Total Score)	r = 0.24, p = 0.001	r = -0.23, p = 0.001	r = -0.19, p = 0.001	r = -0.27, p = 0.001
Components of Differentiation				
Emotional Reactivity	r = 0.13, p = 0.015	r = -0.13, p = 0.012	r = -0.11, p = 0.031	r = -0.10, p = 0.048
I-Position	r = 0.27, p = 0.001	r = -0.18, p = 0.001	r = -0.18, p = 0.001	r = -0.27, p = 0.001
Emotional Cutoff	r = 0.17, p = 0.001	r = -0.21, p = 0.001	r = -0.19, p = 0.001	r = -0.16, p = 0.002
Fusion with Others	r = 0.22, p = 0.001	r = -0.24, p = 0.001	r = -0.16, p = 0.002	r = -0.31, p = 0.001
Interactive Communication Patterns				
Constructive Reciprocal	1	-	-	-
Avoidant Reciprocal	r = -0.48, p = 0.001	1	-	-
Demand/Withdraw	r = -0.51, p = 0.001	r = 0.62, p = 0.001	1	-
Emotional Divorce	r = -0.36, p = 0.001	r = 0.41, p = 0.001	r = 0.38, p = 0.001	1

According to the results reported in the Table 2, differentiation has a significant negative correlation with emotional divorce ( $r = -0.27, p < 0.01$ ), avoidant reciprocal communication ( $r = -0.23, p < 0.01$ ), and demand/withdraw communication ( $r = -0.19, p < 0.01$ ), while it has a significant positive correlation with constructive reciprocal communication ( $r = 0.24, p < 0.01$ ). The relationship between the components of differentiation with emotional divorce and communication patterns follows the same pattern ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In the next step, to improve the fit of the initial model, modifications were made based on modification indices (MI), including (1) correlating the errors of the avoidant and

ambivalent attachment styles and (2) correlating the errors of the reciprocal avoidant communication and demand/withdraw interaction patterns. Based on the results, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ) in the modified model was 3.31, indicating a good model fit. The values of GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI, IFI, and TLI in the modified model were respectively .91, .90, .92, .92, .93, and .90, indicating good model fit in the current study. Additionally, the obtained RMSEA value (.07) indicates an acceptable model fit. In total, 51% of the variance in emotional divorce among women was predicted by the model variables. In other words, the model can be generalized to the research population with a 0.05 error probability.

**Table 3**

*Direct Path Coefficients Between Relationships of Research Variables*

Path from/to	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Critical Ratio	p-value
Differentiation to Emotional Divorce	-0.28	0.10	-0.08	-2.95	0.023
Constructive Reciprocal to Emotional Divorce	-0.47	0.05	-0.14	-4.01	0.001
Avoidant Reciprocal to Emotional Divorce	0.53	0.04	0.17	4.83	0.001
Demand/Withdraw to Emotional Divorce	0.43	0.07	0.15	4.13	0.001
Differentiation to Constructive Reciprocal	0.24	0.11	0.07	2.81	0.035
Differentiation to Avoidant Reciprocal	-0.23	0.10	-0.07	-2.80	0.037
Differentiation to Demand/Withdraw	-0.19	0.32	-0.04	-1.22	0.461

According to the results reported in the [Table 3](#), the direct path coefficients of differentiation and communication patterns to the emotional divorce of married women are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, the direct path coefficients

from differentiation to constructive reciprocal communication and avoidant reciprocal communication are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4**

*Indirect Path Estimates of Differentiation to Emotional Divorce Using Bootstrap*

Indirect Path	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Bias	Standard Error	Confidence Level 95%
Differentiation to Emotional Divorce through Constructive Reciprocal	-0.0287	-0.0247	-0.0041	0.0217	-0.0781 to -0.0087
Differentiation to Emotional Divorce through Avoidant Reciprocal	0.0562	0.0558	0.0100	0.0043	0.0102 to 0.0916
Differentiation to Emotional Divorce through Demand/Withdraw	0.0436	0.0433	0.0031	0.0121	0.0891 to 0.1283

According to the results reported in the [Table 4](#), constructive reciprocal, avoidant reciprocal, and demand/withdraw communication patterns have mediated the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce. The upper and lower bounds of these paths in the bootstrap method do not include zero, which also indicates the significance of the indirect paths between these variables. This result demonstrates the significance of the mediating role of communication patterns in the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce ( $p < 0.05$ ).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the prediction of emotional divorce based on differentiation with the mediation of communication patterns. The results showed that constructive reciprocal, avoidant reciprocal, and demand/withdraw communication have mediated the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce. This result indicates the significance of the mediating role of communication patterns in the relationship between differentiation and emotional divorce. The findings of the previous research ([Alavi & Mahoor, 2023](#); [Alijani et al., 2022](#); [Khosravi et al., 2021](#); [Mohlatlole et al., 2018](#); [Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022](#); [Narimani et al., 2021](#); [Rezvani & Saemi, 2019](#); [Weiss et al., 2018](#)) are consistent with the current study's results.

In explaining this hypothesis, emotional cutoff represents a type of feeling of threat and vulnerability in relationships and occasionally a tendency to adopt defensive behaviors such as distancing, abrupt termination of the relationship, and denial of the relationship's importance with others ([Khosravi et al., 2021](#)). In fact, self-differentiation, under the shadow of psychological independence and emotional

maturity, is permanent and dynamic, meaning that individuals are constantly striving to maintain their psychological integrity. In the marital system, when couples' differentiation is high, there is also a greater likelihood of appropriately adapting to conflicts, and emotional reactions decrease ([Yousefi & Bagheryan, 2012](#)). Undifferentiated couples are unable to maintain their individuality and independence from their families of origin, and their marriages are more likely to fail. Differentiated individuals have a clear definition of themselves and their beliefs. They can take greater responsibility for choosing their life directions and maintain self-control in highly emotional situations, making logical and responsible decisions ([Alavi & Mahoor, 2023](#); [Alijani et al., 2022](#)). Couples interact with each other in life and exchange their thoughts and feelings verbally and nonverbally. The differentiation of couples affects the way they communicate with each other. Individuals with high differentiation are aware of their emotions and capable of thoughtfully assessing situations. These people have the ability to develop independent self-growth in intimate relationships and can maintain their serenity and comfort in deep and marital relationships while avoiding fusion and emotional cutoff to adjust internal tensions; differentiation prevents the blending of husband and wife in times of crisis and enables them to resolve existing problems in the relationship with reason and logic, not based on emotional and emotional reactivity, and on the other hand, the undifferentiation of couples through emotional distancing from each other in difficult situations leads them towards marital dissatisfaction ([Khosravi et al., 2021](#); [Rezvani & Saemi, 2019](#)). In explaining the mediating role of interaction patterns between differentiation and emotional divorce, it can be said that an undifferentiated spouse distances themselves from their partner in stressful

situations and avoids them, spouses who cannot function appropriately in stressful situations have low differentiation and use inefficient communication patterns such as withdrawal-demand and avoidance. Spouses with low differentiation are more likely to use avoidant behaviors. In undifferentiated individuals, emotions dominate logic and reasoning, and decisions are made based on emotional reactions. These individuals avoid facing unresolved emotional issues and intimate relationships with others, and in the event of conflict and disagreement, they do not attempt to persuade the other party and establish understanding and avoid conflict. Spouses with a withdrawal-demand communication pattern criticize each other, blame each other, threaten their partner, and withdraw and avoid their spouse, which reflects the low differentiation of the spouses (Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022). The demand-withdraw communication pattern is associated with greater turmoil in couples (Amini et al., 2023). While couples with a high level of differentiation are expected to use more constructive communication patterns because they can behave more rationally in stressful situations. This group of spouses share their problems and issues with each other, avoid aggression, and show logical reactions (Parvandi et al., 2016). Individuals with high levels of differentiation in marriage are emotionally mature, flexible, capable of establishing and maintaining intimate relationships with each other, and can enjoy it. A husband and wife who use more of the constructive reciprocal pattern in marital relationships avoid destructive behaviors and strive to maintain and continue a healthy relationship, feel they understand each other, express their feelings appropriately, offer solutions to communication problems, and negotiate with each other, therefore, they are more satisfied with their marital life.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

Among the limitations of this study, the following can be mentioned: due to the COVID-19 pandemic, electronic questionnaires were used for data collection, which may have influenced the results of the research. Also, the use of self-report scales to measure the study variables was one of the limitations of this research, as some participants might have intentionally or unintentionally reported idealized versions of themselves due to various reasons (including cultural, social, and marital considerations), which could lead to response bias. The sampling method in the present study was convenience sampling; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of the research

beyond the statistical population of the present study. The variables under study in this research might be influenced by cultural factors, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, family structure, and similar factors, which are considered limitations of this study.

It is suggested that future researchers, if conditions permit, use other methods of completing questionnaires, including face-to-face completion, and in addition to using questionnaires, other data collection methods should also be utilized. If possible, to increase the generalizability, random sampling methods should be used. To increase the internal validity of the research, confounding variables should be controlled, meaning the role of influential variables on the research outcome such as cultural context, socioeconomic status should be considered by researchers. Finally, since the present research is correlational and does not examine the causal relationship between variables, future researchers are advised to carry out the research variables in the form of experimental studies. Given the importance and value of emotional divorce and the factors affecting it due to its impact on the relationships between spouses, and considering the increasing importance of the subject and the need of families, especially couples, for appropriate communication patterns as well as the reduction of emotional divorce and the necessity to reduce the high statistics of the devastating phenomenon of divorce, education in the form of specialized courses for couples could have beneficial results in improving marital life satisfaction and reducing divorce. Given the role of differentiation in reducing emotional divorce, it is suggested that necessary trainings be provided in the form of courses or workshops related to couples' differentiation. Based on the results, it is recommended that relevant and competent organizations such as the Organization of Psychology and Counseling, Welfare, Health and Medical Treatment, and Justice, conduct necessary psychological and counseling interventions to identify and treat couples involved in emotional divorce, in accordance with existing conditions and problems, to improve communication patterns and differentiation and reduce their emotional divorce.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethics Considerations

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

## Transparency of Data

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

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

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