




Teachers' Emotional Intelligence and Learner's Perceptions of Their Teachers' Verbal and Non-Verbal Immediacy across Teacher's Gender

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Khabbaz Azar, F., Seifoori, Z., & Ahangari, S. (2024). Teachers' Emotional Intelligence and Learner's Perceptions of Their Teachers' Verbal and Non-Verbal Immediacy across Teacher's Gender. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 5(10), 130-138. <http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.5.10.16>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the relationship between teachers' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and learners' perceptions of their teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy across gender in the Iranian EFL context.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive-correlational design was employed, involving 210 learners (91 males and 119 females) and 30 teachers (13 males and 17 females) from three language institutes in Tabriz, Iran. Data were collected using the Verbal Immediacy Measure (VIM), Non-Verbal Immediacy Measure (NIM), and the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i). The data were analyzed using SPSS, with normality tests, independent samples t-tests, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), and linear regression analyses performed to explore the relationships between variables.

Findings:

The results indicated no significant gender differences in verbal and non-verbal immediacy as perceived by learners ($F(2, 207) = 1.59, p > 0.05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.01$). However, female teachers were perceived to exhibit slightly higher levels of verbal immediacy ($M = 73.63, SD = 0.24$) compared to male teachers ($M = 72.97, SD = 0.28$), and higher levels of non-verbal immediacy ($M = 53.99, SD = 0.20$) compared to male teachers ($M = 53.94, SD = 0.23$). Significant gender differences were found in Emotional Intelligence (EI), with female teachers scoring higher ($M = 3.80, SD = 0.08$) than male teachers ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.06$), $t(28) = 13.35, p < 0.01$. EI was a significant predictor of teacher immediacy ($R^2 = 0.13, F(1, 28) = 4.20, p = 0.05$), particularly among female teachers ($R^2 = 0.62, F(1, 15) = 24.49, p < 0.01$). This suggests that higher EI contributes to more effective immediacy behaviors in the classroom, especially for female teachers.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the importance of Emotional Intelligence in enhancing teacher immediacy, particularly for female teachers in the Iranian EFL context.

While both male and female teachers can effectively use immediacy behaviors, EI plays a more significant role for female teachers. The findings have important implications for teacher training programs, which should incorporate EI development to foster more supportive and engaging learning environments.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Teacher Immediacy, Gender Differences, EFL Context, Iranian Education, Verbal Immediacy, Non-Verbal Immediacy.*

1. Introduction

The dynamics of teacher-student interactions are pivotal in shaping the learning environment and influencing student outcomes. Among the various aspects of these interactions, teacher immediacy, which refers to the verbal and non-verbal behaviors that reduce the psychological and physical distance between teachers and students, has garnered considerable attention in educational research (Gottlieb et al., 1967; Mehrabian, 1967). Teacher immediacy is recognized for its potential to enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic performance, making it a critical component of effective teaching practices (Liu, 2021; Velez & Cano, 2012).

Teacher immediacy encompasses a range of behaviors that communicate warmth, closeness, and approachability. These behaviors can be categorized into verbal and non-verbal immediacy. Verbal immediacy includes behaviors such as using inclusive language, providing personalized feedback, and showing interest in students' opinions (Gottlieb et al., 1967). Non-verbal immediacy, on the other hand, involves physical gestures like eye contact, smiling, and appropriate touch, which signal attentiveness and accessibility (Puertas-Molero et al., 2022).

The impact of teacher immediacy on student outcomes is well-documented. For instance, research by Velez and Cano (2012) demonstrated that higher levels of teacher immediacy are associated with increased student self-efficacy and motivation (Velez & Cano, 2012). Similarly, Liu (2021) found that both verbal and non-verbal immediacy significantly contribute to student motivation in EFL contexts (Liu, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of immediacy behaviors in fostering a supportive and engaging learning environment.

In online and virtual learning environments, where physical separation is inherent, the role of teacher immediacy becomes even more critical. Studies such as those by Ghamdi, Samarji, and Watt (2016) and Bean (2015) highlight the challenges of maintaining immediacy in virtual classrooms and the necessity of adopting specific strategies to overcome these barriers (Bean, 2015; Ghamdi, 2017). For instance, Ghamdi (2017) found that lecturer immediacy in a

distance education program significantly influenced students' learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for educators to be mindful of immediacy behaviors even in non-traditional teaching settings (Ghamdi, 2017).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is another crucial factor that influences teacher-student interactions. EI refers to the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Lucas-Mangas et al., 2022). Teachers with high EI are better equipped to create positive learning environments, manage classroom dynamics, and respond to students' emotional needs (Rajendran et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2020). Research suggests that teachers' EI can enhance their immediacy behaviors. For example, Derakhshan, Zhang, and Zhaleh (2023) found that instructor clarity and non-verbal immediacy, mediated by EI, positively impacted students' affective learning in EFL settings (Derakhshan et al., 2023). This finding aligns with the broader literature indicating that emotionally intelligent teachers are more likely to engage in immediacy behaviors that foster a supportive and effective learning environment (Guo et al., 2022; Melrose & Park, 2020).

Moreover, EI has been shown to influence how teachers handle classroom challenges and maintain rapport with students, which are essential components of immediacy. Dong, Sherer, and Lio (2022) argue that the concept of teacher immediacy is particularly useful for medical educators, who often face emotionally charged situations in the classroom. The ability to remain calm, empathetic, and approachable in such scenarios is indicative of high EI and contributes to more effective teaching and learning outcomes (Dong et al., 2022).

Gender plays a significant role in both teacher immediacy and EI, with research indicating that male and female teachers may differ in their use of immediacy behaviors and in their levels of EI. Studies have shown that female teachers are generally perceived as more immediate and emotionally intelligent than their male counterparts (Khoo, 2014; Zafarghandi et al., 2015). This perception may be rooted in societal expectations and norms surrounding gender and communication, where women are often encouraged to be more expressive and nurturing (Jaya et al., 2022; Romaniuk & Terán, 2021).

For instance, Kianinezhad (2023) explores the influence of teacher credibility and immediacy on learning, noting that female teachers tend to exhibit higher levels of non-verbal immediacy, which enhances their credibility and effectiveness in the classroom (Kianinezhad, 2023). Similarly, studies like those by Mayor (2020) and Terblanche and Terblanche (2022) suggest that female teachers' higher EI allows them to engage more effectively in non-verbal immediacy behaviors, thereby creating a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment (Mayor, 2020; Terblanche & Terblanche, 2022).

In contrast, male teachers may face different challenges when it comes to immediacy. Research by Hoyt and Yeater (2009) suggests that men may struggle with verbal immediacy in certain contexts, such as when dealing with sensitive or emotionally charged situations (Hoyt & Yeater, 2009). This difference could be attributed to societal expectations that discourage men from expressing vulnerability or emotional openness (Morse & Afifi, 2012). However, it is important to note that these gender differences are not absolute and can vary depending on individual characteristics and cultural contexts.

In the Iranian EFL context, the dynamics of teacher immediacy and EI are influenced by cultural and educational norms. Iranian society, which is often described as collectivist and hierarchical, places a high value on respect for authority and the teacher-student relationship (Derakhshan et al., 2023). These cultural characteristics can shape the ways in which teachers engage in immediacy behaviors and manage their emotions in the classroom.

Research by Cai (2021) highlights the importance of teacher immediacy in fostering student willingness to communicate in EFL settings, a critical factor in language acquisition (Cai, 2021). Similarly, studies like those by Yan (2021) and Hu (2023) emphasize the role of teacher immediacy in enhancing students' academic engagement and overall classroom experience (Hu, 2023; Yan, 2021). In such contexts, the ability of teachers to balance authority with approachability, and to manage their emotions effectively, becomes crucial for successful teaching and learning.

The existing literature on teacher immediacy and EI provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to effective teaching practices in various educational settings. However, there is a need for more research exploring these dynamics in specific cultural contexts, such as Iran, where gender roles and societal expectations may influence both teacher behavior and student perceptions. Building on the existing literature, this study aims to examine the

relationship between teachers' EI and learners' perceptions of their teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy across gender in the Iranian EFL context. By focusing on the interplay between EI and immediacy, and considering the potential impact of gender, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how these factors influence the teaching and learning process.

Specifically, the study will address the following research questions:

- Are there significant gender differences in Iranian EFL teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy as perceived by their students?
- Are there significant gender differences in the EI of Iranian EFL teachers?
- Can EFL teachers' EI predict their immediacy behaviors?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive-correlational design to investigate the relationship between teachers' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and learners' perceptions of their teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy across gender in the Iranian EFL context. The participants included 210 learners (91 males and 119 females) and 30 teachers (13 males and 17 females). The learners were between the ages of 18 and 30 and were enrolled at three different language institutes in Tabriz, Iran. All learners were at the intermediate level of English proficiency, determined through placement tests and interviews conducted by the institutes. To ensure accurate assessments, learners who had been taught by the same teacher for two successive terms were purposively selected. The teacher participants, aged between 25 and 35, held M.A. degrees in English teaching, had 7 to 10 years of teaching experience, and had completed teacher training courses (TTC). Each teacher taught a class with an average of 5 to 7 students.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Verbal Immediacy

The Verbal Immediacy Measure (VIM) developed by Gorham (1988) was used to assess learners' perceptions of their teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors. This instrument consists of 21 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). The items cover various verbal behaviors such as the use of humor, personal

examples, seeking feedback, and addressing students by name. A group average score below 60 is considered low in immediacy, while a score above 60 indicates high immediacy. The reliability of the VIM was confirmed in this study with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.80, indicating good internal consistency (Liu, 2021; Mayor, 2020).

2.2.2. *Non-Verbal Immediacy*

To measure the non-verbal immediacy behaviors of teachers, the Non-Verbal Immediacy Measure (NIM) developed by McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, and Barraclough (1996) was employed. This tool includes 15 items that describe various non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, relaxed body posture, gestures, smiling, and physical proximity. Participants rated the frequency of these behaviors on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). Items related to physical contact were reversed due to cultural norms that limit such interactions. The NIM demonstrated high reliability in this study, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83 (Derakhshan et al., 2023).

2.2.3. *Emotional Intelligence*

The Emotional Intelligence of the teacher participants was assessed using the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) developed by Bar-On (1988). The revised and translated version of the EQ-i, consisting of 90 items, was utilized in this study. Teachers rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very seldom or not true of me) to 5 (Very often true of me). The EQ-i measures five composite scales: Intrapersonal Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Stress

Management, Adaptability, and General Mood, each comprising several subscales. The overall reliability of the EQ-i was confirmed with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79 (Esmaeilshad et al., 2021).

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 24). Initially, normality tests were conducted to ensure that the data met the assumptions required for parametric testing. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each variable. To examine gender differences in teacher immediacy and Emotional Intelligence, independent samples t-tests and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were conducted. Additionally, linear regression analysis was employed to assess whether Emotional Intelligence could predict teachers' immediacy behaviors, with separate analyses for the overall sample and for male and female teachers. Significance was determined at the $p < 0.05$ level, and effect sizes were calculated where appropriate.

3. **Findings and Results**

The study aimed to investigate the relationship between teachers' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and learners' perceptions of their teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy across gender. A total of 210 learners, 91 males and 119 females, participated in this study, along with 30 teachers (13 males and 17 females). The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Immediacy and Emotional Intelligence by Gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Verbal Immediacy	Male	13	72.97	0.28
	Female	17	73.63	0.24
Non-Verbal Immediacy	Male	13	53.94	0.23
	Female	17	53.99	0.20
Emotional Intelligence	Male	13	3.45	0.06
	Female	17	3.80	0.08

As shown in Table 1, the female teachers had slightly higher mean scores in verbal immediacy (M = 73.63, SD = 0.24) compared to male teachers (M = 72.97, SD = 0.28). Similarly, for non-verbal immediacy, female teachers also had marginally higher mean scores (M = 53.99, SD = 0.20) than male teachers (M = 53.94, SD = 0.23). Regarding

Emotional Intelligence, female teachers scored higher (M = 3.80, SD = 0.08) than their male counterparts (M = 3.45, SD = 0.06).

The normality of the data was confirmed through Shapiro-Wilk tests for each variable, all of which had p-values greater than 0.05. This indicated that the assumptions

of normality were satisfied for verbal immediacy ($W = 0.97$, $p = 0.38$), non-verbal immediacy ($W = 0.96$, $p = 0.07$), and emotional intelligence ($W = 0.98$, $p = 0.33$), allowing for the use of parametric tests in subsequent analyses.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences in verbal and non-verbal immediacy based on the gender of the teacher. The results are summarized in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

MANOVA Results for Gender Differences in Teacher Immediacy

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial η^2
Intercept	0.10	137035.54	2	207	0.00	0.10
Gender	0.01	1.59	2	207	0.21	0.01

As shown in [Table 2](#), the MANOVA results ($F(2, 207) = 1.59$, $p > 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) indicate that there were no significant gender differences in verbal and non-verbal immediacy as perceived by learners. Therefore, the

hypothesis that male and female teachers differ significantly in their immediacy behaviors is not supported by the data.

To test for significant differences in Emotional Intelligence (EI) across gender, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

T-test for Gender Differences in Emotional Intelligence

Variable	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
EI	Male	3.45	0.06	13.35	28	0.00	0.35
	Female	3.80	0.08				

The t-test results show a significant difference in EI between male and female teachers ($t(28) = 13.35$, $p < 0.01$), with female teachers having higher EI scores.

To examine whether teachers' Emotional Intelligence could predict their immediacy, a linear regression analysis was conducted, with results presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Regression Analysis: Emotional Intelligence as a Predictor of Teacher Immediacy

Gender Group	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.	Beta (β)	Sig. (β)
Overall	0.36	0.13	0.01	0.03	4.20	0.05	0.072	0.05
Female Teachers	0.79	0.62	0.59	0.02	24.49	0.00	0.267	0.00
Male Teachers	0.36	0.13	0.05	0.05	1.68	0.22	0.287	0.22

The regression analysis revealed that for the overall sample, EI is a significant predictor of teacher immediacy, explaining 13% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.13$, $F(1, 28) = 4.20$, $p = 0.05$). Specifically, for female teachers, EI explained 62% of the variance in immediacy ($R^2 = 0.62$, $F(1, 15) = 24.49$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a strong predictive relationship. In contrast, for male teachers, EI was not a significant predictor of immediacy ($R^2 = 0.13$, $F(1, 11) = 1.68$, $p > 0.05$).

perceptions of their teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy across gender in the Iranian EFL context. The findings of this study offer significant insights into the role of EI in shaping teacher immediacy behaviors and highlight the gender differences in these dynamics.

The results revealed no significant gender differences in verbal and non-verbal immediacy as perceived by learners, suggesting that both male and female teachers in the Iranian EFL context are equally capable of maintaining immediacy in the classroom. However, the analysis did indicate that female teachers were perceived to have slightly higher levels of verbal and non-verbal immediacy compared to their male

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the relationship between teachers' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and learners'

counterparts. Furthermore, the study found significant gender differences in EI, with female teachers demonstrating higher levels of EI than male teachers. Importantly, EI was found to be a significant predictor of teacher immediacy, particularly for female teachers, suggesting that higher levels of EI contribute to more effective immediacy behaviors in the classroom.

The finding that there were no significant gender differences in teacher immediacy aligns with the work of Furlich (2016), who found that both male and female instructors could effectively utilize immediacy behaviors to engage students (Furlich, 2016). This suggests that while societal expectations might shape perceptions of gender roles, when it comes to classroom behavior, both male and female teachers can adopt and benefit from immediacy behaviors. This is further supported by the findings of Hoyt and Yeater (2009), who noted that while there are differences in how men and women may use verbal immediacy in specific contexts, these differences do not necessarily translate into overall effectiveness in teaching environments (Hoyt & Yeater, 2009).

The slightly higher levels of immediacy perceived in female teachers may be attributed to the generally higher EI levels observed among women, as found in this study. Research has consistently shown that women tend to score higher on measures of EI, which includes the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions (Zafarghandi et al., 2015). Higher EI likely enables female teachers to be more attuned to their students' emotional states and more adept at employing both verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors that foster a supportive classroom environment. This aligns with the findings of Derakhshan, Zhang, and Zhaleh (2023), who demonstrated that instructor clarity and non-verbal immediacy, mediated by EI, significantly enhanced students' affective learning (Derakhshan et al., 2023).

The significant predictive relationship between EI and teacher immediacy, particularly among female teachers, underscores the importance of emotional skills in effective teaching. Teachers with high EI are better equipped to create a learning environment that is emotionally supportive and conducive to student engagement. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the role of EI in enhancing teacher-student interactions and improving educational outcomes (Dong et al., 2022). The fact that EI was a stronger predictor of immediacy among female teachers may reflect the greater socialization of women to be emotionally expressive and responsive, as suggested by

Romaniuk and Terán (2021). This socialization likely makes EI a more salient factor in how female teachers manage their classrooms and interact with students (Romaniuk & Terán, 2021).

However, it is important to note that while EI significantly predicted teacher immediacy among female teachers, the same was not true for male teachers. This could suggest that male teachers may rely on different strategies or competencies to establish immediacy in the classroom. For example, male teachers might draw more on authority or expertise, rather than emotional connection, to engage students (Morse & Afifi, 2012). This divergence indicates that while EI is a valuable asset in teaching, its impact may be moderated by gender-specific social and cultural expectations.

Moreover, the cultural context of Iran, which is characterized by its collectivist and hierarchical values, may also play a role in shaping these dynamics. In collectivist cultures, the emphasis on group harmony and respect for authority could influence how immediacy behaviors are perceived and enacted (Derakhshan et al., 2023). In such a context, the ability to balance emotional expressiveness with the need to maintain professional boundaries might be particularly important for female teachers, who are often expected to embody both warmth and authority.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within the specific cultural and educational context of Iran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping both teacher behaviors and student perceptions, and the results may not be directly applicable to EFL contexts in other countries with different cultural norms and educational systems (Khoo, 2014). Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures of EI and student perceptions of teacher immediacy, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. While these measures are commonly used in educational research, they do not capture the full complexity of the classroom interactions or the potential influence of external factors, such as the specific content being taught or the broader institutional environment.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of the study, which does not allow for conclusions about causality. While the findings suggest a relationship between EI and

teacher immediacy, the direction of this relationship cannot be determined. Longitudinal studies would be needed to explore how EI and immediacy behaviors develop over time and whether interventions aimed at improving EI can lead to sustained changes in teacher immediacy.

Lastly, the sample size, particularly of teachers, was relatively small, which may affect the robustness of the findings. While the study provides valuable insights into gender differences in EI and immediacy, a larger and more diverse sample would allow for more nuanced analyses and potentially reveal additional factors that influence these dynamics.

Given the limitations of the current study, several avenues for future research are recommended. First, future studies should explore the relationship between EI and teacher immediacy in different cultural contexts to determine whether the findings of this study are generalizable across cultures. Comparative studies that examine how cultural values influence the expression and perception of immediacy behaviors would be particularly valuable (Ghamdi, 2017; Ghamdi et al., 2016; Yan, 2021). Additionally, research should consider the role of other individual differences, such as personality traits or teaching experience, in shaping teacher immediacy. These factors could interact with EI in complex ways, influencing how teachers engage with their students.

Another important direction for future research is to employ longitudinal designs to examine how teacher immediacy and EI evolve over time. Such studies could assess whether interventions aimed at enhancing EI lead to long-term improvements in immediacy behaviors and student outcomes. Moreover, experimental studies that manipulate levels of teacher immediacy or EI could provide more definitive evidence of causality and help identify the most effective strategies for fostering immediacy in the classroom (Cai, 2021; Juma et al., 2022).

Finally, future research should also consider the impact of immediacy on different types of student outcomes, such as cognitive versus affective learning. While this study focused on immediacy as a predictor of engagement and motivation, it would be beneficial to explore how immediacy behaviors influence other aspects of student learning, including critical thinking skills, creativity, and long-term academic achievement (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Liu, 2021). Understanding these relationships could provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of teacher immediacy in education.

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice, particularly in the context of teacher training and professional development. Given the significant role of EI in predicting teacher immediacy, it is essential to incorporate EI training into teacher education programs. Such training could include modules on emotional awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, with a focus on how these skills can be applied to enhance immediacy behaviors in the classroom (Melrose & Park, 2020). By equipping teachers with the tools to manage their own emotions and respond effectively to their students' emotional needs, teacher education programs can help foster more supportive and engaging learning environments.

Moreover, professional development initiatives should emphasize the importance of both verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors and provide teachers with practical strategies for implementing these behaviors in their daily interactions with students. Workshops or coaching sessions that allow teachers to practice and refine their immediacy skills could be particularly beneficial (Bayaa & Samir, 2020; Jensen, 1999). Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their own teaching practices and seek feedback from students and colleagues to continually improve their immediacy behaviors.

Finally, educational institutions should consider the broader cultural and organizational factors that influence teacher immediacy. For instance, schools and universities could create environments that support and reward immediacy behaviors, such as by recognizing and celebrating teachers who excel in building strong relationships with their students (Terblanche & Terblanche, 2022). Institutional policies that promote open communication, collaboration, and emotional well-being among teachers could also contribute to a culture of immediacy, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students.

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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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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