

Media Exposure and Perfectionism: The Mediating Role of Fear of Missing Out

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of fear of missing out (FoMO) in the relationship between social media exposure and perfectionism among Romanian university students.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational design was used, and the sample consisted of 380 university students in Romania, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie table through multi-stage cluster sampling. Participants completed three standardized instruments: the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOs), and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS). Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive and Pearson correlation analyses and AMOS-21 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess direct and indirect relationships among variables. Model fit was evaluated using χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA indices.

Findings: The results indicated significant positive correlations between social media exposure and FoMO ($r = 0.51, p < 0.001$), FoMO and perfectionism ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$), and social media exposure and perfectionism ($r = 0.43, p < 0.001$). SEM revealed that FoMO significantly mediated the relationship between social media exposure and perfectionism ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$), with a total effect of $\beta = 0.47 (p < 0.001)$. The model demonstrated excellent fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.07$, GFI = 0.94, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.053.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that fear of missing out plays a significant mediating role in linking social media exposure to increased perfectionistic tendencies in young adults. Interventions targeting FoMO may be effective in reducing perfectionism exacerbated by social media engagement.

Keywords: Social media exposure, fear of missing out, perfectionism.

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has become an inseparable component of modern life, particularly for younger generations who have grown up in the digital age. While these platforms offer opportunities for connectivity, expression, and access to information, they also expose individuals to continuous social comparison, unrealistic portrayals of others' lives, and performance-based validation, all of which can significantly affect psychological well-being. Among the psychological constructs associated with the pervasive influence of social media, perfectionism has garnered increasing scholarly attention. Perfectionism is broadly defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards for oneself, coupled with overly critical self-evaluations. When magnified by social media exposure, this cognitive-behavioral trait may intensify as individuals are persistently confronted with idealized content curated by their peers or influencers (Beelen & Karsay, 2024; Vranken et al., 2023). The hyper-visibility of social achievements and aesthetic ideals on digital platforms fosters an environment where perfectionist tendencies are continuously triggered and reinforced.

A key mechanism that may explain how social media exposure leads to elevated perfectionism is the psychological construct known as the fear of missing out (FoMO). FoMO refers to a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. It is particularly prevalent in online environments, where the curated and instantaneous sharing of social events can lead individuals to perceive their own lives as inadequate or unfulfilling by comparison (Campos-Castillo et al., 2024; Gu et al., 2023). This perceived inadequacy may then push individuals to engage in perfectionistic behaviors in an effort to match or surpass the social standards displayed online. The mediating role of FoMO in the relationship between social media use and negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, has been documented in several studies, yet its role in the perfectionism pathway remains underexplored (Alfaridzi et al., 2024; Obrenovic et al., 2024; Sao et al., 2024).

A growing body of research suggests that social media environments, particularly those emphasizing image-focused and performance-driven content, create normative pressures that intensify perfectionistic self-concepts. Users often internalize idealized digital personas and engage in upward social comparisons, which may lead to distorted

self-perception and the pursuit of unattainable standards (Roshan et al., 2024; Ventriglio et al., 2024). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat frequently showcase snapshots of success, beauty, and social popularity, inadvertently contributing to the belief that perfection is not only desirable but also necessary for social validation and belonging (Sung, 2024; Yu et al., 2024). For adolescents and emerging adults, whose self-identities are still forming, this dynamic can be particularly detrimental. Adolescents may begin to equate self-worth with online approval, leading to compulsive checking behaviors, content curation, and relentless self-monitoring to meet perceived standards of perfection (Aulia & Setiawan, 2024; Muhammad et al., 2024).

The intersection between perfectionism and social media exposure is further complicated by the cultural and contextual dimensions of digital engagement. In many societies, digital literacy and access have become markers of social inclusion, making online presence not merely optional but essential. As such, individuals who disengage from social media may feel socially isolated or disconnected, while those who remain engaged may feel overwhelmed by the need to maintain an idealized persona (Bell, 2025; Bell & Westoby, 2024). This digital double bind underscores the psychological tension between authenticity and idealization, which can exacerbate perfectionistic tendencies, especially in young people navigating identity formation and social belonging (Hobiri et al., 2024; Tera et al., 2024). Notably, recent research has emphasized that the fear of being left out of the social loop—often prompted by the visibility of others' activities—drives individuals to engage more intensely with social media, thus perpetuating a cycle of comparison, inadequacy, and perfectionism (Campos-Castillo et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024).

In examining the mechanisms that underlie this cycle, FoMO emerges as a psychologically salient mediator. Individuals with high levels of FoMO tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity to online content that suggests social exclusion or superiority, leading to compensatory behaviors such as excessive self-presentation and the pursuit of perfection (Layug et al., 2022a, 2022b). These behaviors may include photo editing, strategic posting, and self-censorship to align with social expectations. Over time, these compensatory strategies may evolve into entrenched perfectionistic patterns that compromise mental well-being. Furthermore, social media algorithms that reward attention-grabbing and idealized content reinforce these behaviors, creating a feedback loop in which validation becomes

contingent on digital performance rather than authentic self-expression (Adindu et al., 2024; Priyana, 2023).

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has also shed light on the intensification of these dynamics under conditions of isolation and uncertainty. With physical social interactions limited, individuals turned to social media as a primary source of connection and information, inadvertently increasing their exposure to content that could trigger FoMO and perfectionism. The constant presence of others' curated experiences during a time of global hardship heightened the discrepancy between personal reality and perceived social expectations, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and compulsive self-enhancement behaviors (Gu et al., 2023; Nugroho et al., 2023). These findings are especially relevant for populations experiencing developmental vulnerabilities, such as adolescents and university students, who may lack the psychological maturity and coping resources to navigate such complex emotional landscapes (Akbar et al., 2024; Vranken et al., 2023). This study aims to fill the existing gap by examining the mediating role of fear of missing out in the relationship between social media exposure and perfectionism among Romanian university students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships between social media exposure, fear of missing out, and perfectionism among young adults. The target population consisted of university students residing in Romania, and the sample size was determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) table, resulting in a total of 380 participants. Participants were selected through a multi-stage cluster sampling method from several major universities in urban regions. The inclusion criteria were: age between 18 and 30 years, current enrollment in an undergraduate or graduate program, and active use of at least one social media platform. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and completed the research instruments in a self-administered online format. Demographic data collected included age, gender, level of education, and average daily time spent on social media.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

To assess perfectionism, the study utilized the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), developed

by Frost et al. in 1990. This widely used instrument consists of 35 items and evaluates six distinct dimensions of perfectionism: Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about Actions, and Organization. Participants respond to items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of perfectionistic tendencies. The FMPS has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, with numerous studies confirming its high internal consistency, convergent validity, and test-retest reliability across diverse populations and cultural contexts (Ibili et al., 2025; Mousavi, 2025).

2.2.2. Fear of Missing Out

Fear of missing out was measured using the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOs) developed by Przybylski et al. in 2013. This standard scale contains 10 items that capture the general apprehension individuals feel about being excluded from rewarding experiences that others may be having. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all true of me) to 5 (Extremely true of me), with higher scores reflecting a greater fear of missing out. The FoMOs is unidimensional and has been validated across different age groups and cultural settings, with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically exceeding 0.85) and construct validity supported by correlations with psychological need satisfaction, social media engagement, and well-being indicators (Bissell & Chou, 2024; Holte et al., 2024).

2.2.3. Social Media Exposure

Social media exposure was assessed using the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), developed by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Johnson in 2013. The SMUIS consists of 10 items designed to evaluate the degree to which social media is integrated into an individual's social routines and emotional experiences. It includes two subscales: Social Integration and Emotional Connection, and Integration into Social Routines. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher total scores indicating greater exposure and reliance on social media. The SMUIS has shown satisfactory psychometric properties in various studies, with good internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha typically above 0.80) and confirmed convergent validity through its associations with other measures of digital

engagement and psychological functioning (Gu et al., 2023; Nugroho et al., 2023; Roshan et al., 2024).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used to summarize demographic variables and the scores on the perfectionism, fear of missing out, and social media exposure scales. To assess the linear relationships between the dependent variable (perfectionism) and the independent variables (fear of missing out and social media exposure), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. In addition, the mediating role of fear of missing out in the relationship between social media exposure and perfectionism was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS-21. The model fit was evaluated using standard indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA), and the Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df). Significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$ throughout the analyses.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 380 participants, of whom 214 (56.3%) identified as female and 166 (43.7%) as male. The mean age of the participants was 22.48 years ($SD = 2.91$), with ages ranging from 18 to 30. Regarding educational level, 264 participants (69.5%) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, while 116 participants (30.5%) were graduate students. In terms of daily social media use, 98 participants (25.8%) reported using social media for less than 2 hours per day, 146 participants (38.4%) used it between 2 and 4 hours, 89 participants (23.4%) reported 4 to 6 hours, and 47 participants (12.4%) reported using social media for more than 6 hours daily. The majority of participants ($n = 307$, 80.8%) reported using more than one social media platform actively.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 380)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Media Exposure	36.42	6.78
Fear of Missing Out	32.17	7.01
Perfectionism	108.53	14.64

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the mean score for social media exposure was 36.42 ($SD = 6.78$), indicating moderate to high engagement across participants. The mean for FoMO was 32.17 ($SD = 7.01$), suggesting a moderately elevated level of fear of missing out. The average perfectionism score was 108.53 ($SD = 14.64$), reflecting generally high perfectionist tendencies among the sample.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were examined and confirmed. Skewness and kurtosis values for all key variables ranged between -0.88 and 0.74,

indicating approximate normal distribution. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were non-significant for perfectionism ($D = 0.036$, $p = 0.182$), fear of missing out ($D = 0.041$, $p = 0.093$), and social media exposure ($D = 0.039$, $p = 0.111$), further supporting the normality of the data. Scatterplots and residual plots indicated linear and homoscedastic relationships between variables. Additionally, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.12 to 1.29, and tolerance values ranged from 0.77 to 0.89, confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern in this study.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social Media Exposure	—		
2. Fear of Missing Out	.51** ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Perfectionism	.43** ($p < .001$)	.48** ($p < .001$)	—

As shown in Table 2, social media exposure was significantly and positively correlated with FoMO ($r = .51$,

$p < .001$) and perfectionism ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Additionally, FoMO was significantly associated with perfectionism ($r =$

.48, $p < .001$). These results support the hypothesized associations among all variables in the model.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Threshold
Chi-Square (χ^2)	174.36	—
df	84	—
χ^2/df	2.07	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.053	≤ 0.06
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95

As shown in Table 3, social media exposure was significantly and positively correlated with FoMO ($r = .51$, $p < .001$) and perfectionism ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Additionally,

FoMO was significantly associated with perfectionism ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). These results support the hypothesized associations among all variables in the model.

Table 4

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects Between Research Variables

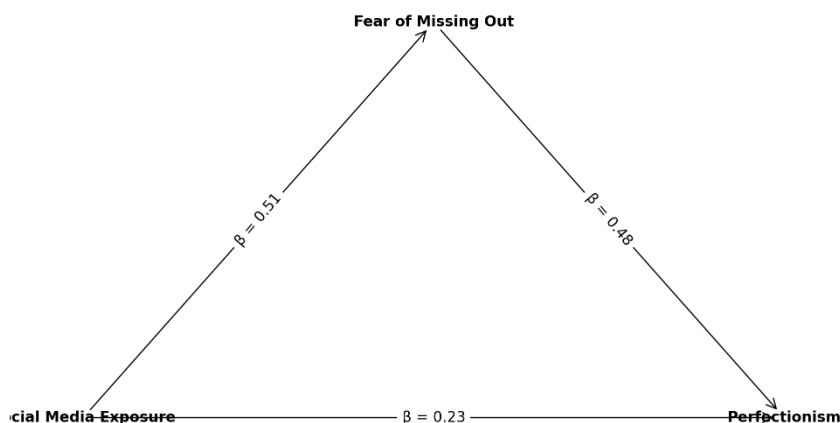
Path	B	S.E.	β	p
Social Media \rightarrow FoMO	0.48	0.06	0.51	$< .001$
FoMO \rightarrow Perfectionism	0.57	0.07	0.48	$< .001$
Social Media \rightarrow Perfectionism	0.29	0.08	0.23	$< .001$
Social Media \rightarrow FoMO \rightarrow Perfectionism (Indirect)	0.27	0.05	0.24	$< .001$
Social Media \rightarrow Perfectionism (Total Effect)	0.56	0.07	0.47	$< .001$

Table 4 presents the path coefficients for the structural equation model. Social media exposure had a significant direct effect on FoMO ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$), and FoMO had a significant direct effect on perfectionism ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of social media exposure on

perfectionism remained significant ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .001$), while the indirect effect via FoMO was also significant ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$). The total effect of social media exposure on perfectionism was substantial ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < .001$), supporting the mediating role of FoMO in this relationship.

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed significant associations between social media exposure, fear of missing out (FoMO), and perfectionism among Romanian university students. Pearson correlation analysis showed that social media exposure was positively associated with both FoMO and perfectionism. Furthermore, Structural Equation Modeling confirmed that FoMO significantly mediated the relationship between social media exposure and perfectionism, suggesting that individuals who are more frequently exposed to social media content are more likely to experience FoMO, which in turn increases their perfectionistic tendencies. These findings align with the theoretical framework that positions FoMO as a psychological bridge connecting external digital stimuli to internal cognitive-affective patterns.

The positive correlation observed between social media exposure and perfectionism aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of online platforms in cultivating unrealistic social comparisons and internalized performance standards (Beelen & Karsay, 2024; Vranken et al., 2023). The curated nature of content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok presents users with highly idealized images of success, appearance, and lifestyle, contributing to heightened self-scrutiny and the internalization of perfectionistic norms. As supported by Roshan et al. (Roshan et al., 2024), frequent engagement with such content can exacerbate mental health concerns in individuals with tendencies toward self-critical thinking, such as those exhibiting perfectionism. Similarly, Akbar et al. (Akbar et al., 2024) emphasized that exposure to polished digital representations reinforces cognitive distortions related to personal inadequacy and drives individuals toward unattainable standards.

The mediating effect of FoMO is a crucial contribution of this study. The results demonstrate that individuals who are more frequently engaged with social media are more susceptible to the emotional discomfort of being excluded from others' experiences, which in turn motivates perfectionistic behaviors aimed at gaining inclusion and approval. This finding is supported by Campos-Castillo et al. (Campos-Castillo et al., 2024), who argued that FoMO acts as a trigger for various maladaptive coping mechanisms, especially in adolescent and young adult populations. Moreover, the findings align with the research of Layug et al. (Layug et al., 2022b), who reported that individuals experiencing high levels of FoMO often attempt to

compensate for their perceived exclusion by intensifying their social media presence, often through carefully curated and perfectionist self-presentations.

The findings of this study also resonate with Obrenovic et al. (Obrenovic et al., 2024), who found that identity disturbance in the digital age is linked with compulsive self-presentation behaviors driven by social media norms. These behaviors are often rooted in a fear of being socially irrelevant, a concern that overlaps conceptually with FoMO and is exacerbated by constant digital exposure. Likewise, Sao et al. (Sao et al., 2024) noted that Gen Z individuals, in particular, are vulnerable to experiencing anxiety and stress related to their digital presence, much of which is influenced by how well they conform to the social standards perpetuated online. The present study confirms these patterns and extends them by empirically establishing the role of FoMO in the perfectionism pathway.

In line with Ventriglio et al. (Ventriglio et al., 2024), who emphasized that prolonged engagement with social media correlates with rising trends in mental health issues among adolescents, our findings contribute to a broader understanding of how cognitive traits like perfectionism can be shaped by persistent online engagement. Furthermore, this study supports the argument by Adindu et al. (Adindu et al., 2024) that the psychological consequences of social media are not merely transient emotional states but may lead to enduring cognitive patterns, such as perfectionism, which impact individuals' overall mental health. By examining FoMO as a mechanism, this research elucidates the affective processes that channel the influence of external digital stimuli into internal cognitive schemas.

The results also resonate with findings by Gu et al. (Gu et al., 2023), who found that fear-based responses to social media exposure, including FoMO, are predictive of anxiety and depressive symptoms. In our study, FoMO emerges as more than a transient emotional reaction—it serves as a consistent mediator that links environmental triggers (social media) with stable personality traits (perfectionism). This insight is essential for developing more precise mental health interventions. Similarly, Jiang et al. (Jiang et al., 2024) emphasized the importance of digital literacy and social support in buffering against the psychological risks of media contact, suggesting that equipping individuals with strategies to regulate their digital engagement may mitigate the onset of perfectionist tendencies driven by FoMO.

Siddiqua et al. (Siddiqua et al., 2023) reported that the post-pandemic world has intensified social media's influence on psychological functioning, particularly as individuals

increasingly rely on digital platforms for social connection. This context amplifies the relevance of our findings, especially since Romanian university students have experienced similar shifts toward digital dependence in their academic and social lives. As supported by Muhammad et al. (Muhammad et al., 2024), youth populations in various countries have reported elevated stress and perfectionism linked to online activity, underscoring the cross-cultural applicability of the perfectionism-FoMO pathway observed in our study.

Moreover, the findings of Aulia and Setiawan (Aulia & Setiawan, 2024) support the notion that social media usage is not inherently problematic, but its psychological effects depend on the motives and patterns of use. When individuals use social media for validation or to reduce FoMO, they may inadvertently reinforce perfectionistic self-presentation behaviors. Bell and Westoby (Bell & Westoby, 2024) discussed the broader public health implications of social media-related perfectionism, noting that policy-level interventions must address the digital pressures that contribute to mental health concerns. Our study further underscores this urgency, demonstrating how a seemingly benign behavioral pattern—checking social media—can evolve into a psychological vulnerability when mediated by FoMO.

Hobiri et al. (Hobiri et al., 2024) emphasized the need for critical awareness campaigns to educate youth about the psychological traps of digital environments. This aligns with our findings and suggests practical applications such as psychoeducation programs that specifically address FoMO and perfectionism in university counseling services. Similarly, Tera et al. (Tera et al., 2024) highlighted the potential of social media campaigns in promoting mental health awareness, provided they avoid reinforcing idealized standards. The presence of mental health content on social media, as examined by Beelen and Karsay (Beelen & Karsay, 2024), shows promise, but must be strategically curated to promote authenticity rather than perfection.

This study also adds a geographical and cultural dimension to the existing literature by focusing on Romanian students, a demographic often underrepresented in global mental health research. By replicating patterns observed in other contexts such as Indonesia (Nugroho et al., 2023), Pakistan (Muhammad et al., 2024), and the United States (Layug et al., 2022a), our findings reinforce the global relevance of the social media-FoMO-perfectionism nexus. Moreover, Vranken et al. (Vranken et al., 2023) suggested that during periods of lockdown and crisis, individuals are

especially prone to heightened emotional responses to social media, which may amplify perfectionistic tendencies. While our study was conducted in a post-pandemic context, its findings still resonate with these observations, pointing to the long-term psychological echoes of that digital reliance.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the strengths of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships among social media exposure, FoMO, and perfectionism. Longitudinal studies would provide greater clarity on the directionality of these relationships. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias or inaccurate self-perception. Participants might underreport perfectionist tendencies or overstate socially acceptable behaviors. Third, the sample was limited to Romanian university students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other age groups or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the study did not differentiate between types of social media use (e.g., active vs. passive), which could yield more nuanced insights into the mechanisms at play.

Future research should explore the longitudinal trajectories of social media-induced perfectionism, with a particular focus on how FoMO evolves over time as a function of platform design, peer norms, and individual differences in coping strategies. It would also be valuable to investigate gender differences in these dynamics, as prior research suggests that females may experience higher levels of FoMO and perfectionism in online environments. Additionally, future studies could examine protective factors such as digital resilience, self-compassion, and offline social support to identify buffers that reduce vulnerability to these psychological risks. Expanding the scope to include adolescents, working professionals, and older adults would enhance the ecological validity of the findings. Qualitative approaches may also provide deeper insight into the lived experiences underlying these associations.

Mental health professionals working in university settings should consider incorporating psychoeducational workshops that address the psychological impacts of social media, with a focus on FoMO and perfectionistic self-evaluation. Digital literacy programs should not only teach technical skills but also promote healthy digital habits and critical thinking about online content. Interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness-based

approaches may help individuals manage the emotional discomfort associated with FoMO and develop healthier self-standards. Universities should also consider integrating these insights into student orientation programs and wellness initiatives to proactively address the mental health challenges posed by digital engagement. Finally, social media platforms and content creators must be encouraged to prioritize authenticity and mental health promotion in their content to foster a more psychologically supportive digital environment.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical 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 equally contributed to this article.

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