

Counseling Strategies for Enhancing Self-Advocacy in Young Adults with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore and develop effective counseling strategies to enhance self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities. This qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with 22 young adults aged 18 to 30 with various disabilities, including physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Participants were recruited through disability support organizations, educational institutions, and social media platforms. The data collection focused on understanding participants' experiences, challenges, and strategies related to self-advocacy. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns in the data, with the goal of achieving theoretical saturation. The analysis revealed three main themes: understanding of self-advocacy, experiences with self-advocacy, and challenges and barriers to self-advocacy. Participants highlighted the importance of self-advocacy for personal empowerment and independence. Positive advocacy experiences were linked to increased self-esteem and better outcomes in education and employment. Support systems, such as family and counselors, were crucial in facilitating self-advocacy. However, significant barriers included societal attitudes, institutional policies, and personal limitations. Assistive technology and comprehensive leadership training were identified as effective strategies for enhancing self-advocacy skills. Enhancing self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities requires targeted counseling interventions that focus on building essential skills and addressing barriers. Collaborative approaches involving family and community support are critical. Policymakers should implement inclusive policies and ensure access to assistive technologies. Future research should explore the long-term impact of self-advocacy training and consider the intersectionality of disability with other factors such as race and gender.

Keywords: Self-advocacy, young adults with disabilities, qualitative research, counseling strategies, assistive technology, empowerment, barriers, support systems.

1. Introduction

Self-advocacy is a critical skill for young adults with disabilities as it empowers them to take control of their lives, make informed decisions, and advocate for their rights and needs. The development of self-advocacy skills is particularly important during the transition to adulthood, a period characterized by significant changes and challenges (Lee, 2023; Rabiei et al., 2013; Tideman & Svensson, 2015).

Self-advocacy is defined as the ability to understand and communicate one's needs, rights, and desires. It involves skills such as self-awareness, communication, and problem-solving, which are essential for navigating various life domains, including education, employment, and personal relationships (Schmidt et al., 2019). According to Wehmeyer (2014), self-determination, which includes self-advocacy, is a "family affair" that significantly influences the quality of life and overall well-being of individuals with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2014).

In the context of education, self-advocacy is crucial for securing necessary accommodations and supports. Carter et al. (2013) found that transition-age youth with autism or intellectual disabilities benefit greatly from developing self-advocacy skills, which help them navigate the complexities of educational environments (Carter et al., 2013). Furthermore, the role of self-advocacy extends beyond education into employment. Lindstrom, Doren, and Miesch (2011) highlighted that career development and long-term employment outcomes are significantly improved when young adults with disabilities possess strong self-advocacy skills (Lindstrom et al., 2011; Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Despite its importance, many young adults with disabilities face substantial barriers to effective self-advocacy. These barriers can be personal, social, and institutional. Personal limitations, such as cognitive or physical challenges, can impede the ability to advocate effectively (Tideman & Svensson, 2015). Social barriers, including stereotypes and societal attitudes, further complicate the process. According to Lee (2023), societal misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities can lead to discrimination and exclusion, making it difficult for them to assert their needs and rights (Lee, 2023).

Institutional barriers also play a significant role. Ripat and Woodgate (2017) emphasized the importance of assistive technology in supporting the productivity of young adults with disabilities. However, access to these technologies is often limited by bureaucratic hurdles and policy gaps (Ripat

& Woodgate, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of resources and support services can hinder the development of self-advocacy skills (Lindstrom et al., 2011; Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Counseling has been identified as a key strategy for enhancing self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities. Effective counseling interventions focus on building self-awareness, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. Grenwelge, Zhang, and Landmark (2010) emphasized the importance of comprehensive leadership training programs that incorporate self-advocacy components. Such programs can empower youth with disabilities by providing them with the tools and confidence needed to navigate various life challenges (Grenwelge et al., 2010).

Lee (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, parents, and teachers regarding a health self-advocacy program with a school-home connection. The study found that a collaborative approach involving both educators and family members significantly enhances the effectiveness of self-advocacy training. This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to counseling that includes family and community support (Lee, 2023).

Additionally, Lindstrom, Kahn, and Lindsey (2013) explored the barriers and strategies for young adults with disabilities in their early career years. They found that targeted counseling interventions could help individuals overcome employment-related challenges by teaching them how to advocate for reasonable adjustments and disability disclosure (Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Various strategies have been identified as effective in promoting self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities. One such strategy is the use of compensation techniques, as highlighted by Reis, McGuire, and Neu (2000). High-ability students with learning disabilities who succeed in college often employ compensation strategies to navigate academic challenges. These strategies include seeking alternative methods to achieve their goals, such as using technology or modifying their learning environment (Reis et al., 2000).

The importance of assistive technology in supporting self-advocacy cannot be overstated. Ripat and Woodgate (2017) found that assistive technologies significantly enhance the productivity and independence of young adults with disabilities. These technologies provide practical solutions to everyday challenges, enabling individuals to

perform tasks that might otherwise be difficult or impossible (Ripat & Woodgate, 2017).

Leadership training programs also play a crucial role. Grenwelge, Zhang, and Landmark (2010) described comprehensive leadership training for youth with disabilities as an effective way to build self-advocacy skills. Such programs often include components on self-awareness, goal setting, and effective communication, all of which are essential for self-advocacy (Grenwelge et al., 2010).

The impact of self-advocacy on the lives of young adults with disabilities is profound. Effective self-advocacy leads to better educational outcomes, increased employment opportunities, and improved overall quality of life. Lindstrom, Doren, and Miesch (2011) highlighted that individuals who are able to advocate for themselves are more likely to secure and maintain employment (Lindstrom et al., 2011). This is supported by Lindstrom, Kahn, and Lindsey (2013), who found that self-advocacy skills are critical for navigating the early career years and overcoming employment-related barriers (Lindstrom et al., 2013).

In the educational domain, self-advocacy skills help students obtain necessary accommodations and supports, leading to better academic performance and higher levels of satisfaction. Carter et al. (2013) found that self-determination and self-advocacy are closely linked to positive educational outcomes for transition-age youth with disabilities (Carter et al., 2013).

Furthermore, self-advocacy has significant social and emotional benefits. Wehmeyer (2014) emphasized that self-determination, including self-advocacy, is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and overall well-being. When individuals are able to advocate for themselves, they experience a greater sense of control over their lives, which contributes to their mental and emotional health (Wehmeyer, 2014).

Enhancing self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities is essential for their successful transition to adulthood. Despite the challenges and barriers they face, effective counseling strategies can empower these individuals by building their self-awareness, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. The use of assistive technologies, comprehensive leadership training, and support from family and community are all critical components of successful self-advocacy interventions.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing qualitative insights into the experiences and needs of young adults with disabilities. By identifying effective counseling strategies and highlighting the importance of

self-advocacy, this research seeks to support the development of interventions that can enhance the quality of life and overall well-being of this population. Future research should continue to explore innovative approaches to self-advocacy training and the impact of these interventions on various life domains.

In conclusion, self-advocacy is a vital skill that can significantly improve the lives of young adults with disabilities. Through targeted counseling interventions, supportive resources, and collaborative efforts between educators, families, and communities, we can empower these individuals to advocate for their rights and needs, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research study aimed to explore and develop effective counseling strategies to enhance self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities. A qualitative design was selected to gain deep insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and needs of the participants. This design is particularly suitable for capturing the nuanced and subjective aspects of self-advocacy that might not be evident through quantitative methods.

The participants of this study were young adults aged 18 to 30 years, who have been diagnosed with various disabilities, including physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. The selection criteria ensured a diverse representation of disabilities to encompass a wide range of experiences and challenges faced by young adults in advocating for themselves. Participants were recruited through disability support organizations, educational institutions, and social media platforms that cater to individuals with disabilities.

The study aimed for theoretical saturation, a point where no new themes or insights are observed in the data. Initial recruitment targeted a sample size of approximately 20 participants, with the understanding that recruitment would continue until theoretical saturation was achieved. This approach ensured that the data collected was rich and comprehensive enough to inform the development of effective counseling strategies.

Interviews were conducted either in person, via video conferencing, or over the phone, depending on the participants' preferences and accessibility needs. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-

recorded with the participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, a method well-suited for qualitative research as it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while providing the flexibility to probe further into interesting or unexpected areas that arise during the interview. The interview guide was developed based on a thorough literature review and consultation with experts in the fields of disability studies and counseling.

The semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences with self-advocacy, the challenges they faced, the strategies they used, and their perceptions of effective support. Key areas covered in the interviews included:

- **Understanding of Self-Advocacy:** Participants were asked to describe what self-advocacy means to them and how they perceive its importance in their lives.
- **Experiences with Self-Advocacy:** Questions focused on specific instances where participants had to advocate for themselves, the outcomes of these experiences, and the factors that influenced their success or failure.
- **Challenges and Barriers:** Participants discussed the obstacles they faced in self-advocacy, including societal attitudes, accessibility issues, and personal limitations.
- **Support and Resources:** The interviews explored the types of support and resources participants found helpful or unhelpful, including the role of family, friends, educational institutions, and professional counselors.
- **Suggestions for Improvement:** Participants were invited to provide suggestions on how counseling and support services could better assist them in developing self-advocacy skills.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves identifying, analyzing, and

reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis was conducted in several stages:

Familiarization with the Data: Transcriptions of the interviews were read and re-read to immerse the researchers in the data. Initial notes and observations were recorded during this stage.

Generating Initial Codes: A systematic coding process was applied to the data. Interesting features related to the research questions were highlighted and coded. NVivo software was used to organize and manage the codes.

Searching for Themes: Codes were collated into potential themes, and all relevant data extracts were gathered under these themes. This stage involved identifying broader patterns and relationships within the data.

Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This process involved checking the themes against the coded data extracts and the entire data set.

Defining and Naming Themes: Clear definitions and names were developed for each theme. Detailed analysis of each theme was written, highlighting the nuances and complexities within the data.

Producing the Report: The final stage involved integrating the thematic analysis with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to produce a coherent narrative. This report included rich, detailed descriptions and direct quotations from participants to illustrate the themes.

Throughout the analysis process, measures were taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the themes with existing literature and consulting with experts in disability studies and counseling. Member checking was also conducted, where participants were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the findings, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 22 participants, consisting of 12 females and 10 males, aged between 18 and 30 years. The age distribution showed a relatively even spread across the range, with a slight concentration in the 22-25 year age bracket. Participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, with 9 identifying as Caucasian, 6 as African American, 4 as Hispanic, and 3 as Asian. The educational levels varied, with 8 participants having completed high school, 10 holding an undergraduate degree, and 4 having attained a graduate degree. Regarding the types of disabilities, 7 participants had

physical disabilities, 6 had intellectual disabilities, 5 had developmental disabilities, and 4 had a combination of disabilities. The majority of participants (15) were currently

employed or in educational programs, while the remaining 7 were seeking employment or additional educational opportunities.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Understanding of Self-Advocacy	Definition of Self-Advocacy	Self-expression, Independence, Autonomy
	Importance of Self-Advocacy	Empowerment, Confidence, Rights Awareness
	Personal Goals and Self-Advocacy	Goal-setting, Personal Achievement, Future Planning
	Knowledge and Skills	Communication Skills, Negotiation, Problem-Solving
	Role Models and Inspiration	Mentorship, Inspirational Figures, Peer Support
	Advocacy in Different Contexts	School, Workplace, Healthcare
Experiences with Self-Advocacy	Positive Advocacy Experiences	Success Stories, Overcoming Obstacles, Recognition
	Negative Advocacy Experiences	Discrimination, Failure, Frustration
	Support Systems	Family Support, Friends, Counselors
	Strategies Used	Self-reflection, Adaptation, Persistence
	Impact of Advocacy	Self-esteem, Social Influence, Opportunities
	Learning from Experience	Learning Curve, Feedback, Improvement
	Advocacy in Education	Accommodations, IEPs, Advocating for Needs
	Advocacy in Employment	Reasonable Adjustments, Disability Disclosure, Job Seeking
Challenges and Barriers	Social Barriers	Stereotypes, Prejudice, Social Isolation
	Institutional Barriers	Inaccessible Services, Bureaucratic Hurdles, Policy Gaps
	Personal Limitations	Physical Limitations, Cognitive Challenges, Mental Health Issues
	Societal Attitudes	Discrimination, Lack of Awareness, Social Exclusion
	Accessibility Issues	Built Environment, Digital Accessibility, Transport Issues
	Lack of Resources	Financial Constraints, Information Access, Support Services
	Communication Barriers	Miscommunication, Language Barriers, Understanding Needs
	Legal and Policy Barriers	Legal Rights, Policy Implementation, Advocacy Legislation
	Emotional and Psychological Barriers	Stress, Anxiety, Fear of Advocacy

3.1. Understanding of Self-Advocacy

Definition of Self-Advocacy: Participants described self-advocacy as a way to express their needs and desires, highlighting its importance for gaining independence and autonomy. One participant noted, "Self-advocacy is about speaking up for what I need, it's about being able to make decisions for myself."

Importance of Self-Advocacy: The interviews revealed that self-advocacy empowers individuals, boosts their confidence, and enhances their awareness of their rights. "Knowing how to advocate for myself makes me feel more confident and in control of my life," a participant shared.

Personal Goals and Self-Advocacy: Setting personal goals was seen as a crucial aspect of self-advocacy, helping participants achieve personal milestones and plan for the future. A participant mentioned, "Advocating for my goals has helped me achieve things I never thought possible."

Knowledge and Skills: Effective self-advocacy requires a range of skills, including communication, negotiation, and problem-solving. "Learning how to communicate my needs

clearly has made a huge difference," one participant explained.

Role Models and Inspiration: Having role models and sources of inspiration, such as mentors and peers, was found to be vital in encouraging self-advocacy. A participant stated, "Seeing others advocate for themselves inspires me to do the same."

Advocacy in Different Contexts: Participants highlighted the need to adapt self-advocacy strategies across various contexts such as school, workplace, and healthcare settings. "Advocating in the workplace is different from school, but both are important," a participant observed.

3.2. Experiences with Self-Advocacy

Positive Advocacy Experiences: Many participants shared success stories of overcoming obstacles and gaining recognition through self-advocacy. One participant proudly said, "I was able to get the accommodations I needed in college because I advocated for myself."

Negative Advocacy Experiences: Despite positive outcomes, some participants experienced discrimination,

failure, and frustration when their advocacy efforts were not successful. "There have been times when I felt like no one was listening, and it was very frustrating," a participant recounted.

Support Systems: The role of support systems, including family, friends, and counselors, was emphasized as critical in supporting self-advocacy. "My family and friends have always been there to support me when I needed to advocate for myself," a participant shared.

Strategies Used: Participants employed various strategies such as self-reflection, adaptation, and persistence to improve their self-advocacy skills. "I've learned to be persistent and not give up, even when it's challenging," one participant stated.

Impact of Advocacy: Self-advocacy had a significant impact on participants' self-esteem, social influence, and opportunities. "Advocating for myself has opened up so many new opportunities," a participant explained.

Learning from Experience: Learning from both successes and failures was crucial for improving self-advocacy skills. A participant noted, "Each experience, whether good or bad, taught me something valuable about how to advocate better."

Advocacy in Education: Participants discussed the importance of advocating for their needs in educational settings, such as securing accommodations and individualized education plans (IEPs). "Getting the right accommodations in school was a game-changer for me," one participant emphasized.

Advocacy in Employment: In the workplace, reasonable adjustments and disability disclosure were key areas where participants needed to advocate for themselves. A participant mentioned, "Disclosing my disability and asking for accommodations at work was challenging but necessary."

3.3. *Challenges and Barriers*

Social Barriers: Social barriers such as stereotypes, prejudice, and social isolation were significant obstacles to self-advocacy. "People's prejudices can make it really hard to advocate for yourself," a participant shared.

Institutional Barriers: Participants faced institutional barriers including inaccessible services, bureaucratic hurdles, and policy gaps. One participant commented, "Dealing with bureaucratic red tape was one of the biggest challenges I faced."

Personal Limitations: Physical limitations, cognitive challenges, and mental health issues were personal barriers that affected participants' ability to advocate for themselves.

"My physical limitations sometimes make it hard to speak up for myself," a participant noted.

Societal Attitudes: Discrimination, lack of awareness, and social exclusion were societal attitudes that hindered self-advocacy. A participant remarked, "Society's lack of understanding about disabilities makes self-advocacy much harder."

Accessibility Issues: Issues related to the built environment, digital accessibility, and transport were significant barriers. "Getting around in a world that's not built for people with disabilities is a constant challenge," one participant explained.

Lack of Resources: Financial constraints, limited access to information, and insufficient support services were major resource-related barriers. "Not having enough resources or information makes it hard to know how to advocate effectively," a participant observed.

Communication Barriers: Miscommunication, language barriers, and difficulty in understanding needs were common challenges in self-advocacy. "Sometimes it's hard to communicate my needs clearly, which makes advocating for myself difficult," a participant shared.

Legal and Policy Barriers: Legal rights, policy implementation issues, and the need for advocacy legislation were highlighted as significant barriers. A participant stated, "Navigating the legal aspects of advocacy is daunting and complex."

Emotional and Psychological Barriers: Stress, anxiety, and fear of advocacy were emotional and psychological barriers faced by participants. "The fear of speaking up and the anxiety it causes can be overwhelming," a participant admitted.

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

The qualitative research study aimed to explore effective counseling strategies for enhancing self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities. Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed several key themes: understanding of self-advocacy, experiences with self-advocacy, and challenges and barriers to self-advocacy. The findings indicate that self-advocacy is a multifaceted construct involving personal empowerment, goal-setting, and the ability to navigate various life contexts. Support systems, such as family, friends, and counselors, play a critical role in facilitating self-advocacy, while barriers like societal attitudes, institutional policies, and personal limitations impede it.

The study's results align with existing literature on the importance and complexity of self-advocacy for individuals with disabilities. Participants described self-advocacy as a means of achieving independence and autonomy, which is consistent with the definition provided by Wehmeyer (2014), who emphasized self-determination as a crucial aspect of quality of life for individuals with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2014). The findings also highlight the critical role of family and community support, echoing Wehmeyer's assertion that self-determination is a "family affair."

Positive advocacy experiences were linked to personal empowerment and increased self-esteem, similar to the findings of Carter et al. (2013), who noted that self-advocacy skills significantly improve educational outcomes for youth with disabilities. The study also identified that support systems, including family and friends, are essential in encouraging and sustaining self-advocacy efforts (Carter et al., 2013). This finding is consistent with Lee (2023), who highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach involving educators and family members in self-advocacy programs (Lee, 2023).

The role of assistive technology was also underscored, with participants noting its importance in overcoming daily challenges. This supports the findings of Ripat and Woodgate (2017), who emphasized the significant impact of assistive technology on the productivity and independence of young adults with disabilities (Ripat & Woodgate, 2017). Furthermore, the necessity for comprehensive leadership training programs, as discussed by Grenwelge, Zhang, and Landmark (2010), was evident in the participants' narratives, indicating that structured programs can effectively enhance self-advocacy skills (Grenwelge et al., 2010).

However, the study also revealed substantial barriers to self-advocacy, such as societal attitudes and institutional policies. Participants frequently encountered stereotypes and discrimination, which hindered their advocacy efforts. This aligns with the observations of Lee (2023), who noted that societal misconceptions about disabilities contribute to the challenges faced by individuals in advocating for their needs (Lee, 2023).

Institutional barriers, including bureaucratic hurdles and policy gaps, were significant impediments, consistent with findings by Lindstrom, Kahn, and Lindsey (2013), who identified similar challenges in their study on the early career years of young adults with disabilities (Lindstrom et al., 2013). Personal limitations, such as cognitive and physical challenges, also played a role, echoing the findings of

Tideman and Svensson (2015), who explored the role of self-advocacy in a transformed welfare system (Tideman & Svensson, 2015).

Overall, the study's findings support existing literature on the critical role of self-advocacy in improving the lives of young adults with disabilities and highlight the need for targeted interventions to address the barriers they face.

While this study provides valuable insights into self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities, it is not without limitations. The qualitative design, while rich in detail, limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The sample size of 22 participants, though sufficient for achieving theoretical saturation, may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all young adults with disabilities. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Future studies could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative measures to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Building on the findings of this study, future research should explore the impact of specific counseling interventions on self-advocacy skills. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how self-advocacy skills develop over time and identify critical periods for intervention. Additionally, research should consider the intersectionality of disability with other factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, as highlighted by Karpicz (2020), who explored the self-advocacy experiences of disabled graduate students of color. Understanding these intersections could lead to more tailored and effective interventions (Karpicz, 2020).

Future research could also investigate the role of technology in supporting self-advocacy. Given the positive impact of assistive technology noted in this study and others (Ripat & Woodgate, 2017), examining how emerging technologies can further enhance self-advocacy skills would be valuable. Moreover, exploring the effectiveness of various self-advocacy training programs across different contexts, such as educational institutions, workplaces, and healthcare settings, could provide comprehensive insights into best practices.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for counselors, educators, and policymakers. Counseling interventions should focus on building self-awareness, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities, as these are critical components of self-advocacy. Incorporating self-advocacy training into existing educational curricula and vocational programs could

enhance the preparedness of young adults with disabilities to navigate various life challenges.

Educators and counselors should adopt a collaborative approach, involving family members and other support systems, to create a comprehensive support network for individuals with disabilities. Programs like the health self-advocacy program with a school-home connection described by Lee (2023) can serve as models for such collaborative efforts (Lee, 2023).

Policymakers should address the institutional barriers that impede self-advocacy by implementing policies that promote accessibility and inclusion. Ensuring that assistive technologies are available and affordable is crucial, as highlighted by Ripat and Woodgate (2017). Additionally, policies should aim to raise awareness and reduce societal misconceptions about disabilities, thereby creating a more supportive environment for self-advocacy (Ripat & Woodgate, 2017).

In conclusion, enhancing self-advocacy among young adults with disabilities requires a multifaceted approach that addresses personal, social, and institutional barriers. By focusing on effective counseling strategies and supportive interventions, we can empower these individuals to advocate for their rights and needs, ultimately improving their quality of life and fostering a more inclusive society.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics 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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