



# Proposing a Model for Predicting Self-Efficacy Based on Early Maladaptive Schemas Mediated by the Meaning of Life in Remarried Couples

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Firouzi, E., Dokaneifard, F., & Bostan, A. (2025). Proposing a Model for Predicting Self-Efficacy Based on Early Maladaptive Schemas Mediated by the Meaning of Life in Remarried Couples. *KMAN Counseling and Psychology Nexus*, 3, 1-10.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.fct.psynexus.3.22>



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to propose a model for predicting self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas, coping strategies, and differentiation, mediated by the meaning of life in remarried couples. This study is classified as basic-applied research in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of methodology. The statistical population of the present study included all remarried couples who visited counseling centers in District 3 of Tehran. The sampling method in this study was voluntary and convenience-based. The sample size, based on Cochran's formula and the nature of the research, and considering potential attrition among participants, was at least 400 individuals, who were selected using the convenience and voluntary sampling method. For data analysis, statistical tests, including multivariate regression and path analysis, were conducted using SPSS software version 24. The results indicated that the proposed model for predicting general self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by the meaning of life in remarried couples fits the empirical data.

**Keywords:** self-efficacy, early maladaptive schemas, meaning of life, remarried couples

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is the first stage of the family life cycle and is regarded as a fundamental factor in establishing a healthy society and an essential phenomenon (Phillips, 2018). In this context, choosing a spouse as the cornerstone of family formation is of great importance. Therefore, marriage marks the beginning of a new phase in life, encompassing a significant portion of an individual's

personal and social existence (Purnomo & Suprihandari, 2025; Ridwan, 2025; Zhao & Mansor, 2025). When conducted with appropriate conditions and sufficient awareness, it can positively impact individuals and society, such as reducing the prevalence of diseases and violence and, consequently, increasing physical and mental health (Brown, 2019). Despite the growing knowledge of factors contributing to marital success, the state of marriage remains unstable and declining (Santos et al., 2024; Sari Rahmaini et

al., 2024). Timely, scientific, and comprehensive investigations of marriage represent the first step toward identifying vulnerabilities and improving the situation as much as possible (Odero, 2019; Sari Rahmaini et al., 2024; Sumari et al., 2024).

Marriages can gravitate toward success or failure depending on the characteristics, actions, and behaviors of the couple (Mazzuca et al., 2019). Successful marriage is, in fact, the most valuable asset and achievement for couples. In such marriages, marital satisfaction and compatibility increase, fostering physical and psychological well-being, which affects various aspects of individuals' health (Khodadadi Sangdeh et al., 2020).

Family is the primary social institution in society, and marriage is its foundation. However, in some cases, various factors lead to the dissolution of the first marriage, and remarriage occurs. In such cases, cultural, economic, traditional, and belief systems, as well as the presence of children, pose challenges (Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 2019).

Remarriage offers a second chance to individuals who have lost their spouse, enabling them to experience shared life anew (Maleki, 2016). It is increasingly becoming a social norm, with at least one individual in half of all marriages having prior marital experience (Walsh, 2012; Yılmaz et al., 2023). Individuals' experiences in remarriage are significantly influenced by the failure of their first marriage, impacting everything from deciding to remarry and choosing a new spouse to resolving conflicts in the new marriage (Diamond et al., 2017). People often use their first marriage as a benchmark, seeking a relationship that lacks the negative traits of their previous marriage and compensates for its shortcomings (Altgelt, 2019).

Research indicates that second marriages often end more quickly than first marriages (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016; Yılmaz et al., 2023). Deal and Olson (2015) and Fox and Schreiner (2014) report a 67% divorce rate in second marriages, with a fivefold higher dissolution rate within the first three years (Deal & Olson, 2015). Contributing factors to the instability of second marriages include complex family structures, unresolved emotional issues from previous relationships, fear of another separation, high stress levels, and inadequate communication skills (Fox & Shriner, 2014). Experiences from past relationships often make individuals less trusting of their current spouse, placing remarried individuals at a greater risk of marital dissolution (Evraire et al., 2022).

Additionally, many studies on remarriage assume that the dissolution of a marital relationship is a life transition that, due to the tension it creates, necessitates adjustment by both adults and children (Schramm & Becher, 2020). Most researchers emphasize factors such as the accumulation of stressors, self-efficacy, and how individuals perceive remarriage, which are influenced by interpersonal and structural coping resources as well as contextual factors like race, ethnicity, and culture (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020).

Self-efficacy and optimistic expectations are linked to performance and health. High self-efficacy is associated with better stress regulation, greater adaptability, increased confidence, improved physical conditions, and enhanced well-being (Adadioğlu & Oğuz, 2021; Razazan, 2025). Individuals who believe potential threats are unmanageable perceive many aspects of their environment as dangerous. They magnify potential threats, worry about rare occurrences, and experience anxiety, which disrupts their performance. Such individuals anticipate failure and tend to withdraw from challenges or abandon activities entirely (Hebdon et al., 2021).

On the contrary, individuals who believe they can manage potential threats neither overemphasize threats nor dwell on distressing thoughts about them (Alessandri et al., 2021). These individuals expect success in their work, focus their thoughts on achieving success, and overcome obstacles (Hebdon et al., 2021). Self-efficacy beliefs are also related to life satisfaction in adults, as academic success, social competence, and avoidance of risky behaviors—resulting from high self-efficacy—play a role in achieving a life filled with satisfaction and contentment (Karimpoor et al., 2023).

Marriage is one of the most critical life events that profoundly influences an individual's trajectory. Various factors impact marital quality and life. Couples enter marriage with distinct personality traits developed before marriage, influencing their marital and shared life. One significant factor is early maladaptive schemas. Early maladaptive schemas, as developmental roots, significantly contribute to various psychological disorders (Jarvis et al., 2019) and can lead to marital issues such as dissatisfaction and conflicts (Körük & Kurt, 2019).

Schemas are deep, pervasive patterns composed of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations (Young et al., 2016). From a cognitive perspective, schemas are fundamental cognitive components formed based on past events, especially during childhood, and serve as templates for processing later experiences, influencing how individuals interpret life events (Faustino & Vasco, 2019).

Early maladaptive schemas, as the deepest cognitive structures, are enduring principles formed through negative experiences with parents, siblings, significant others, and peers.

Since schemas form the core of self-concept, when maladaptive, they make individuals vulnerable to various deficiencies and problems (Bach et al., 2018). Early maladaptive schemas act as filters that validate childhood experiences (Young et al., 2016), predisposing individuals to psychological disturbances, such as personality disorders, depression, anxiety, dysfunctional relationships, addiction, psychosomatic disorders, mild character problems, and chronic disorders (Kunst et al., 2020).

Finding meaning in life helps individuals identify their primary concerns and adopt flexible and adaptive strategies to achieve their life goals. Meaning is considered a positive and desirable psychological quality in life (Askari Zadeh & Pouladi, 2016). Since the meaning of life arises from an individual's context and background, many factors have been identified as contributors to life meaning (Talebzadeh Shoushtari et al., 2016).

Meaning often relates to stimuli, connections, and understanding. Understanding and interpretation involve constructing distinct yet interconnected personal interpretations of informational fragments (Vohs et al., 2019). Volkert et al. (2019) describe meaning in life as a multidimensional construct encompassing four main components: purpose (motivation), understanding (cognition), responsible behavior (action), and evaluation (emotion), summarized as PURE (Volkert et al., 2019).

Frankl (1988) views life meaning as unique to each individual, involving "earthly meaning" and "ultimate meaning," with spirituality and religion manifesting the latter. Meaning evolves over time and underscores life's purpose even in challenging circumstances (Hemphill, 2015).

Given the aforementioned studies, early maladaptive schemas seem to predict self-efficacy. Despite extensive research on the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and self-efficacy, the mediating factors in this relationship have often been overlooked. This study explores the mediating role of life meaning in this relationship.

The primary aim of this research is to propose a model for predicting self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by life meaning in remarried couples. The findings can provide valuable insights for counselors and therapists, particularly family and couple therapists. Additionally, these results can serve as theoretical and practical foundations for

improving mental health in various educational and therapeutic institutions. Consequently, this research highlights the necessity of developing a model for predicting self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas, coping strategies, and differentiation, mediated by life meaning in remarried couples.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study is categorized as basic-applied research in terms of purpose, quantitative in terms of data, cross-sectional in terms of study duration, and descriptive-analytical in terms of methodology. The research is descriptive, correlational, consistent, and predictive in nature. The statistical population included all remarried couples visiting counseling centers in District 3 of Tehran. The sampling method was voluntary and convenience-based. Specifically, there are over ten counseling centers in District 3 of Tehran, out of which the researcher voluntarily selected four centers. After announcing a call for participation in a training course aimed at improving marital relationships and obtaining consent forms, questionnaires on self-efficacy, early maladaptive schemas, and meaning in life were distributed among attendees. Following the completion and review of the questionnaires, 400 eligible individuals with scores below the cut-off point, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, were selected.

The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, considering the study type and the logic of regression analysis while accounting for potential participant attrition. A minimum of 400 participants were selected through convenience and voluntary sampling.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Self-Efficacy

Developed by Sherer and Maddux (1982), this scale does not specify factors and items but measures three aspects of behavior: the willingness to initiate behavior, persistence in completing behavior, and resilience in facing obstacles. The validity and reliability of this scale have been confirmed in Iran. The GSES consists of 17 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items 1, 3, 8, 9, 13, and 15 are reverse-scored. The minimum score is 17, and the maximum score is 85, with higher scores indicating higher self-efficacy. Sherer and Maddux (1982) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 for

general self-efficacy. Construct validity has been established, with Barati (1994) translating and validating the scale in Iran. Reliability coefficients reported in various studies include 0.79 (Barati Bakhtiari, 1997), 0.85 (Abdiniya, 1998), and 0.91 (Arabiyan, 2004). Ganji Arjangi and Farahani (2009) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 (Ganji Arjanghi & Farahani, 2009).

### 2.2.2. Early Maladaptive Schemas

This 75-item tool assesses early maladaptive schemas on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "completely true for me" to "completely false for me." Young (1998) developed the short form based on the original 205-item version, measuring 15 maladaptive schemas. The first comprehensive psychometric evaluation of the YSQ was conducted by Schmidt, Joiner, Young, and Telch (1995), who reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.50 and 0.82 for subscales in non-clinical populations (Schmidt et al., 1995). The questionnaire was normed in Iran by Ahi (2005) on a sample of 387 university students from various institutions, with subscale reliability coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.90 (Ahi, 2005). Zolfaghari, Fatehifar, and Abedi (2008) administered the short form to 70 couples, reporting an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 and subscale reliabilities of 0.91 (Disconnection and Rejection), 0.90 (Impaired Autonomy and Performance), 0.73 (Impaired Limits), 0.67 (Other-Directedness), and 0.78 (Over-vigilance and Inhibition) (Zolfaghari et al., 2008).

### 2.2.3. Meaning in Life

Developed by Steger et al. (2006), this scale assesses the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in life. The

MLQ comprises two subscales: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Scores for items 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10 measure the search for meaning, while scores for items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9 (reverse-coded) measure the presence of meaning. Steger et al. (2006) reported reliability coefficients of 0.86 for overall life meaning, 0.87 for the Presence subscale, and 0.70 for the Search subscale (Steger et al., 2006). Test-retest reliability over two weeks in Iran yielded coefficients of 0.84 for the Presence subscale and 0.74 for the Search subscale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.75 for the Search subscale and 0.78 for the Presence subscale, indicating good internal consistency (Eshtad, 2009).

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Hypothesis testing and model evaluation were conducted using multivariate regression and path analysis with SPSS software version 28.

## 3. Findings and Results

Based on the correlation coefficients reported in the above matrix, all independent variables and the mediating variable have a significant relationship with the dependent variable, i.e., general self-efficacy, at the 0.01 and 0.05 significance levels. The strength of the correlation coefficients, according to the classification (small: 0.10–0.29; medium: 0.30–0.49; large: 0.50–1.00) proposed by Cohen (1988), ranges from small to medium. The direction of the correlation coefficients aligns with the theoretical foundations of the variables.

**Table 1**

*Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Main Research Variables (n=400)*

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
1. Early Maladaptive Schemas	1		
2. Meaning in Life	-0.23	1	
3. General Self-Efficacy	-0.279	0.376	1

To test the main hypothesis, structural equation modeling (SEM) using the maximum likelihood method was employed. After verifying the assumptions for SEM, the proposed research model was fitted. SEM consists of two types of models: measurement and structural. First, the measurement model for latent variables is examined to determine whether the defined indicators effectively

measure the latent variables. In the structural model, the relationships between latent variables are analyzed.

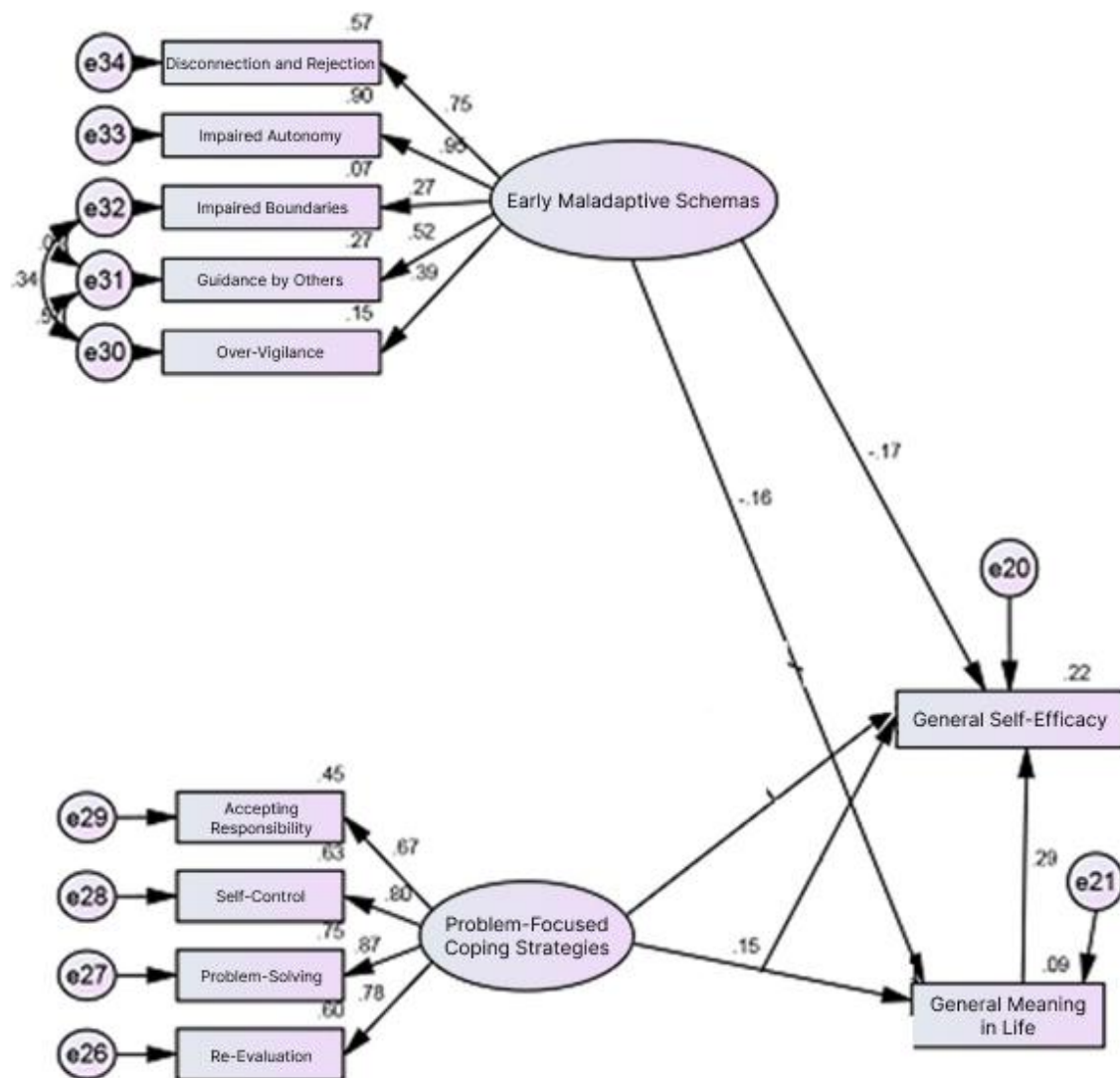
In this study, one latent variable (early maladaptive schemas) was included. Therefore, the measurement model was evaluated before proceeding with SEM. The variables meaning in life and general self-efficacy were treated as observed variables since they lacked sub-components.

**Table 2***Path Coefficients Between Latent Variables and Their Indicators*

From Latent Variable	To Indicator/Item	Coefficient (b)	SE	CR	p
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Vigilance	1			
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Boundaries Disrupted	1.401	0.181	7.744	0.001
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Autonomy Disrupted	3.347	0.375	8.924	0.001
Early Maladaptive Schemas	Disconnection/Rejection	3.459	0.39	8.868	0.001

The path coefficients demonstrate significant relationships between the latent variable (early maladaptive schemas) and its indicators, confirming that these indicators can effectively measure the latent variable.

After confirming the assumptions and validating the measurement model, the structural model of the research was evaluated.

**Figure 1***Proposed Research Model with Standardized Coefficients*

The model includes 42 variables: 19 observed variables represented in rectangles and 23 latent variables represented

in circles. Among the circles, four represent main latent variables, and 19 represent error variables indicated within



smaller circles. Of the variables, 23 are exogenous (independent), while 19 are endogenous (dependent). The variable general self-efficacy includes 17 items and no sub-components. Similarly, the variable meaning in life consists

of 10 items without sub-components, both treated as observed variables in the structural model.

To assess the fit between the collected empirical data and the proposed model, fit indices were used.

**Table 3**

*Fit Indices for the Structural Model*

Fit Indices	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Initial Model	484.78	145	3.34	0.077	0.893	0.860	0.903	0.885	0.903
Modified Model	169.29	142	1.89	0.047	0.936	0.914	0.964	0.956	0.963
Acceptable Threshold	Close to 0	-	<3	<0.08	>0.90	>0.80	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90

The fit indices for the initial model show that some, such as GFI, fall just outside the acceptable range but are very close to the threshold. In such cases, researchers can apply software-suggested modifications with statistical and theoretical justification to improve model fit. Following these recommendations, three covariances between error terms associated with the latent variable *early maladaptive schemas* (numbers 30, 31, and 32) were established. After this minor adjustment, all fit indices fell within acceptable ranges, confirming the overall research hypothesis.

The final findings indicate that the model for predicting general self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by meaning in life in remarried couples fits the empirical data.

Fit indices assess how well the theoretical model aligns with empirical data, indicating the extent to which the proposed theoretical model is supported by the observed data.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main hypothesis of the study was confirmed, indicating that the model for predicting general self-efficacy based on early maladaptive schemas mediated by meaning in life in remarried couples aligns with empirical data. The findings are consistent with similar studies (Esfandabad & Haseli, 2015; Heidari et al., 2023; Koochi et al., 2021; Qashqai et al., 2023; Samakoush, 2023; Sarkhosh & Javidi, 2015; Tabatabaeifar et al., 2022; Zohreh et al., 2023), which demonstrated a relationship between maladaptive schemas and self-efficacy. Additionally, the results broadly indicate that early maladaptive schemas have a significant negative relationship with couples' self-efficacy. Eskandari and Jalali (2019) showed that psychological resilience is directly predictable by self-efficacy and meaning in life (Eskandari & Jalali, 2020). Similar studies (Bapiri et al., 2020; Khaldi

et al., 2020), explored the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between meaning in life and its effects.

In explaining the findings, schemas can be described as structures or frameworks for understanding and interpreting environmental situations. Early maladaptive schemas, specifically, are cognitive structures that regulate and organize information-processing processes (Gibson, 2004). These schemas influence couples' feelings and perceptions about themselves and their abilities. Self-efficacy relates to an individual's sense of capability in managing learning and mastering life challenges. Research shows that couples with higher self-efficacy employ more cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Moreover, individuals with high self-efficacy choose more challenging lives, recover their sense of self-efficacy faster, and persist through difficulties.

Key determinants for these findings include goal selection, implementation, effort and perseverance, decision-making, emotional regulation, and self-regulation. These elements lead to higher self-efficacy. Meaning in life, a profound psychological component and a fundamental human need, plays a significant role in this process.

Meaning in life is recognized as a foundation of positive human functioning (Steger & Shin, 2010). Individuals who select meaningful goals are more likely to thrive across various aspects of life (Ho et al., 2010). People who find meaning in life recognize their internal resources and abilities to confront challenging and stressful situations, investing the necessary time and energy to navigate them successfully. Consequently, meaning in life fosters a sense of inner capability, clear goals, and motivation, leading to increased self-efficacy. According to the findings, early maladaptive schemas and meaning in life can predict the self-efficacy levels of remarried couples.

Bandura emphasized that psychological interventions, regardless of their form, can alter the level and strength of

self-efficacy. Self-efficacy regulates activities, aligns them with goals, and promotes a positive self-concept. Meaning in life contributes to goal-setting and the formation of a positive self-concept. By using appropriate self-regulation strategies, individuals consciously and logically perceive their effectiveness, resulting in optimal self-efficacy. This mechanism supports persistence in the face of adverse experiences, even when confronted with threats to self-efficacy arising from internal factors, such as early maladaptive schemas, or external environmental factors.

Every study encounters limitations that may affect its execution and the generalization of its findings. This study is no exception, with the following limitations:

1. The use of self-report tools to measure self-efficacy, early maladaptive schemas, coping strategies, differentiation, and meaning in life may have led participants to consciously or unconsciously present themselves in a favorable light.
2. Participants' potential concerns about how the questionnaire findings might impact their personal lives, which were mitigated by anonymizing the questionnaires and providing explanations.
3. The voluntary convenience sampling method used limits the generalizability of the findings.

Based on the findings, family counselors and clinical professionals are advised to focus on correcting maladaptive coping strategies, teaching effective coping strategies, and enhancing individuals' self-differentiation to improve meaning in life and prevent the weakening and collapse of family institutions.

Given the significant influence of mass media on public attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts, and their role in disseminating information, it is recommended that media outlets address topics related to remarriage, family relationships, and spousal interactions. Educational programs should aim to enrich marriages and provide information on marital and family issues. Similarly, magazines and journals should dedicate more attention to these topics.

Governmental organizations are encouraged to offer pre- and post-marital training to reduce divorce rates, enhance the quality and stability of marriages, and support policies that promote marriage and population growth.

### 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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