

Perceived Support and Emotional Well-being in First-Generation College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the perceived sources of support and their influence on the emotional well-being of first-generation college students in China. This research employed a qualitative design grounded in a constructivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 first-generation undergraduate students from various universities across China, selected through purposive sampling. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 and represented diverse academic disciplines and geographical backgrounds. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and meanings associated with participants' perceptions of support and emotional experiences. Thematic analysis revealed four overarching categories: academic and institutional support, family and social support, emotional challenges and coping, and identity and self-perception. Participants emphasized the importance of faculty accessibility, effective advising, peer academic collaboration, and resource availability in shaping their emotional security. Emotional encouragement from family, friendship networks, and campus social integration were also critical to well-being. Despite experiencing stress, self-doubt, and impostor feelings, many participants employed adaptive coping strategies such as journaling, exercise, and time management. A strong sense of belonging, academic confidence, and future orientation contributed positively to emotional resilience. The development of self-worth and meaning-making emerged as central to sustaining motivation and psychological well-being. Perceived support plays a vital role in fostering emotional well-being among first-generation college students. The findings underscore the need for culturally responsive, student-centered interventions that address academic, emotional, and identity-related needs. Institutions should enhance inclusive support systems, promote emotional regulation strategies, and validate the lived experiences of first-generation students to support their long-term success and mental health.

Keywords: First-generation college students, emotional well-being, perceived support, qualitative research, academic resilience, student identity.

1. Introduction

First-generation college students (FGCS)—those who are the first in their families to pursue higher education—occupy a unique and often precarious position within university systems worldwide. As pioneers in their educational journey, these students frequently navigate unfamiliar academic terrains without the cultural or experiential guidance typically passed down from college-educated parents. This status, while commendable, is frequently accompanied by heightened vulnerability to psychological stressors, emotional instability, and socio-academic alienation. A growing body of literature indicates that first-generation students tend to report lower levels of subjective well-being, greater emotional exhaustion, and reduced academic self-efficacy compared to their continuing-generation peers (Lawrie & Kim, 2024; Wong & Cheung, 2024). In the context of China's competitive higher education landscape, these students face additional cultural and systemic pressures that may intensify their psychological strain and complicate their access to supportive networks (Wang & Sheibani, 2024).

The emotional well-being of college students has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly as mental health concerns have surged across university campuses. Subjective well-being—a construct encompassing emotional states, life satisfaction, and overall psychological resilience—has emerged as a key indicator of students' ability to thrive in academic environments (Bing et al., 2023). For FGCS, emotional well-being is closely intertwined with perceived social and institutional support, both of which can serve as protective buffers against the stress of transition and the challenges of adaptation (Cheng, 2024). However, support structures that are typically effective for students from more advantaged backgrounds may not always resonate with or reach FGCS populations. As such, there is a critical need to understand the specific types and sources of support that contribute most significantly to these students' emotional health (Farias & Cameron, 2023).

Previous research has demonstrated that support systems—including faculty mentorship, peer connections, parental encouragement, and administrative accessibility—play a crucial role in shaping college students' psychological experiences (Rombaoa et al., 2023). Among FGCS, the perception of available support can determine not only their academic persistence but also their emotional coping mechanisms and self-perception (Trang et al., 2023). Indeed,

first-generation students frequently experience self-doubt, impostor feelings, and alienation from campus culture, which may lead to increased emotional distress and a diminished sense of belonging (Deepa, 2024; Farias & Cameron, 2023). These internalized challenges are exacerbated by structural and interpersonal barriers, including unfamiliarity with bureaucratic systems, a lack of familial understanding of university life, and the pressure to succeed on behalf of one's family or community (Zang & Zhang, 2024).

Emerging studies have also pointed to the role of emotional intelligence and regulation in mitigating the negative effects of academic and social stressors. For instance, students with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies and sustain well-being during periods of academic pressure (Nguyen et al., 2024; Trang et al., 2023). Similarly, resilience, self-efficacy, and time management skills have been identified as significant predictors of well-being, especially among first-year college students adjusting to a demanding educational environment (Abbas, 2023; Nebhinani et al., 2023). Yet, the developmental trajectories of these protective factors differ for FGCS, who often lack early exposure to self-regulatory practices embedded in academic family cultures (DeVitre et al., 2022). The consequence is a heightened reliance on extrinsic motivators, such as family expectations or institutional validation, rather than intrinsic confidence and emotional awareness (Yangqiong, 2024).

Cultural and contextual variables further complicate the experiences of first-generation students. In the Chinese context, where academic success is deeply intertwined with familial honor and social mobility, FGCS often carry a psychological burden that extends beyond personal achievement (He & Tang, 2024; Yin & Zhao, 2024). The societal narrative surrounding education as a pathway out of poverty or rural marginalization intensifies the emotional stakes for these students, making perceived failure not merely personal but familial and communal. Consequently, emotional well-being is frequently threatened by internalized pressure to meet unspoken expectations, feelings of guilt for leaving home, and perceived inadequacy in elite academic spaces (Martínez et al., 2022; Vienrich & Stone, 2022). In such environments, institutional empathy and emotional similarity with peers become essential for fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety (Lawrie & Kim, 2024).

Perceptions of support are influenced not only by the availability of resources but also by how these resources are

framed and delivered. A study on emotional accuracy among college students found that interventions focusing on empathy and shared emotional experiences can significantly reduce stress and promote a sense of inclusion among FGCS (Lawrie & Kim, 2024). Similarly, peer mentoring and community-building initiatives have been shown to buffer against the isolation that many FGCS experience during the initial years of university life (Rausch et al., 2023). Nonetheless, such interventions are not universally accessible, and their effectiveness often depends on institutional commitment to equity and cultural responsiveness (Santos & Sagas, 2022).

Financial insecurity is another pressing issue that affects the emotional stability of FGCS. Unlike their more privileged counterparts, many FGCS must balance academic obligations with part-time work, financial aid navigation, and familial remittances. This multifaceted burden frequently leads to chronic stress, sleep disruption, and diminished academic performance (Rehr et al., 2022). Recent findings suggest that financial literacy programs and economic support mechanisms, when delivered in culturally relevant ways, can alleviate these pressures and enhance students' emotional resilience (Rehr et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). However, FGCS often remain unaware of these resources or feel reluctant to utilize them due to stigma or fear of appearing incapable (Deepa, 2024; Rombaoa et al., 2023).

Another critical but underexplored dimension is the role of perceived meaning and life purpose in FGCS's emotional health. Research suggests that students who perceive their academic journey as aligned with a broader sense of purpose or contribution to family and society report higher levels of psychological well-being and motivation (Zang & Zhang, 2024). This sense of meaning often mediates the negative effects of isolation or academic stress by reframing the educational experience as a transformative rather than burdensome process (Bing et al., 2023). However, this internal reframing is rarely spontaneous and often emerges through intentional reflection, supportive mentorship, and culturally congruent validation (DeVitre et al., 2022).

Although there is a growing body of literature on college student well-being, the nuanced emotional lives of first-generation students remain insufficiently explored in qualitative depth, especially in non-Western contexts. Quantitative approaches have provided valuable correlations between support variables and psychological outcomes, but they frequently fail to capture the lived complexity of being the first in one's family to cross the university threshold

(Homoroc et al., 2022). A qualitative understanding of perceived support and emotional well-being can illuminate the subjective meanings, internal conflicts, and cultural narratives that shape FGCS's academic journey (Cheng, 2024; Farias & Cameron, 2023). Moreover, such inquiry is essential for designing student-centered interventions that resonate with FGCS's lived realities rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model of student development (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Given these gaps, the present study aims to explore the perceived sources of support and emotional well-being among first-generation college students in China through a qualitative lens.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students in relation to their perceived support and emotional well-being. The research was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' subjective interpretations of support systems and emotional challenges encountered in their academic journey. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 30 first-generation college students from various universities across China. Inclusion criteria required that participants self-identify as the first in their family to attend college, be enrolled as undergraduate students, and express willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. The sample was selected to reflect diversity in terms of gender, field of study, and year of enrollment, ensuring a rich variation of perspectives. The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, which was determined when no new themes emerged from successive interviews.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both focused inquiry and the flexibility to explore participants' individual narratives. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature and preliminary discussions with educational experts, comprising open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences of emotional well-being, perceived social and institutional support, and the challenges they faced in navigating college life. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was

conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's availability and location. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was used, allowing participants to review their transcripts and confirm the accuracy of the content.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, facilitated by the use of NVivo software to manage, code, and organize qualitative data systematically. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content, and initial codes were generated inductively from the data. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns and meaningful insights across the interviews. A reflexive process was maintained throughout the analysis, with the researcher keeping analytic memos and engaging in peer debriefing sessions to enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings. This iterative

and interpretive process enabled a nuanced understanding of how perceived support shapes the emotional well-being of first-generation college students in the Chinese context.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 30 first-generation college students from various universities across China. Of the participants, 17 identified as female and 13 as male, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years ($M = 20.3$). In terms of academic year, 8 participants were first-year students, 9 were in their second year, 7 were in their third year, and 6 were in their final year of undergraduate study. The sample included students from diverse academic disciplines, including humanities ($n = 9$), engineering ($n = 7$), social sciences ($n = 6$), natural sciences ($n = 4$), and business-related fields ($n = 4$). Most participants ($n = 21$) reported coming from rural or semi-rural backgrounds, while the remaining 9 were from urban areas. All participants self-identified as first-generation college students, meaning neither parent had completed a university degree.

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Open Codes

Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
Academic and Institutional Support	Faculty Accessibility	approachability of professors, email responsiveness, availability during office hours
	Advising Quality	clarity of advice, helpfulness of course planning, attentiveness to individual goals
	Campus Resources	library support, tutoring services, mental health centers, career counseling access
	Peer Academic Support	study groups, collaborative assignments, peer mentoring
	Administrative Responsiveness	response time, bureaucratic efficiency, problem-solving attitude
Family and Social Support	Learning Environment	classroom atmosphere, teacher encouragement, inclusive curriculum
	Parental Encouragement	emotional backing, motivational phone calls, financial sacrifices
	Friendship Networks	companionship, shared experiences, peer encouragement, group activities
	Emotional Sharing with Family	calling parents during stress, feeling understood by family
	Social Integration	making friends on campus, joining student clubs, event participation
Emotional Challenges and Coping	Community Engagement	volunteering, local networking, service learning
	Stress Management	deep breathing, exercise, journaling, music for relaxation
	Loneliness	feeling isolated, disconnection from peers, lack of belonging
	Academic Pressure	fear of failure, competitive environment, high expectations
	Self-Doubt	second-guessing, negative self-talk, fear of judgment
Identity and Self-Perception	Resilience Development	learning from setbacks, personal growth, seeking feedback
	Burnout Signs	fatigue, lack of motivation, irritability
	Time Management Issues	missing deadlines, overcommitment, difficulty prioritizing
	Sense of Belonging	feeling accepted, cultural inclusion, finding similar backgrounds
	Impostor Feelings	feeling like a fraud, inability to internalize success, comparison with peers
	Academic Confidence	belief in academic skills, performance improvement, overcoming fear
	Self-Worth	recognition of personal value, accepting limitations
	Future Orientation	career planning, goal clarity, optimism about future

Participants highlighted faculty accessibility as a crucial form of academic support that contributed to their emotional

well-being. Many students emphasized the importance of approachable professors who were responsive via email and

available during office hours. One participant noted, “I always felt more confident after talking to my professor. Just knowing they were willing to help made a huge difference.”

Regarding advising quality, students valued academic advisors who offered clear and helpful guidance tailored to their individual educational paths. Several participants shared that meaningful advising interactions helped them make informed decisions. As one student stated, “My advisor really listened. She helped me choose courses that matched my goals, not just requirements.”

The accessibility and usefulness of campus resources such as libraries, tutoring services, mental health centers, and career counseling were frequently mentioned. Students expressed appreciation for spaces where they could seek academic or emotional support. “The tutoring center was my lifeline during exams,” explained one student, adding that “just knowing I could talk to someone in the counseling center made me feel safe.”

Peer academic support was another significant source of assistance. Study groups, collaborative assignments, and peer mentoring were noted as ways students built academic resilience. A participant explained, “Working with my friends on projects made me feel less alone, like we were in it together.”

Participants also discussed administrative responsiveness as an influencing factor. Students appreciated timely replies, clear procedures, and staff willing to resolve issues. “When the office solved my registration problem in one day, it really reduced my stress,” one student reported.

The learning environment played a role in emotional comfort, particularly when professors created inclusive and encouraging classroom settings. “The teacher made sure everyone’s voice was heard—that made me feel like I belonged,” shared a participant.

Under the theme of family and social support, parental encouragement was a recurring topic. Despite physical distance, students described how emotional backing from their parents—through motivational phone calls and even financial sacrifices—helped them persevere. “My mom always reminded me I could do this. She never went to college, but she believed in me,” a student shared.

Friendship networks on campus provided emotional grounding. Peer companionship, shared experiences, and group activities helped reduce stress. One participant reflected, “Having friends to vent to or laugh with made all the difference after a hard day.”

For many, emotional sharing with family remained essential. Students frequently called home during stressful

times, seeking comfort and understanding. “Even though my parents don’t fully understand college life, just talking to them helps me feel grounded,” said one participant.

Social integration was facilitated through friendships, clubs, and campus events. Participants described how these connections promoted a sense of belonging. “Joining the music club gave me a place to relax and meet others who share my interests,” one student said.

Community engagement through volunteering or networking helped students find purpose beyond academics. “Volunteering at the local school reminded me why I’m here—it gave me perspective,” explained a participant.

Within the theme of emotional challenges and coping, stress management strategies such as exercise, deep breathing, journaling, and music were commonly employed. “I started running every morning. It helped clear my mind before class,” one student shared.

Feelings of loneliness were widespread, especially during the early transition to college life. Students described disconnection and a lack of belonging. “Even in a crowd, I felt invisible at times,” said one participant.

Academic pressure emerged as a significant emotional burden. High expectations and fear of failure were frequently discussed. “I constantly felt like I had to prove I deserved to be here,” reported a student.

Self-doubt often accompanied academic stress. Students recounted experiences of second-guessing and internal criticism. “Sometimes I wondered if I was just lucky to get in. Like I didn’t truly earn it,” expressed one participant.

However, many students developed resilience by learning from setbacks and actively seeking feedback. “Failing my first quiz was hard, but it taught me to study smarter and ask for help,” one explained.

Signs of burnout included fatigue, irritability, and loss of motivation. Students spoke of emotional exhaustion, saying, “I was so tired, I didn’t even want to go to class anymore.”

Time management issues such as overcommitment and missing deadlines added to students’ emotional strain. “Balancing study, work, and sleep was overwhelming. I was constantly behind,” noted a participant.

In the final theme of identity and self-perception, a strong sense of belonging contributed positively to emotional well-being. Students who found cultural inclusion or peers with similar backgrounds reported feeling more at ease. “Meeting another first-gen student from my province made me feel less alone,” one student shared.

Impostor feelings were also prevalent, with many students feeling like they didn’t belong or weren’t truly

capable. “Even with good grades, I felt like a fraud, like any day someone would find out I wasn’t smart enough,” said a participant.

Still, some participants reported growing academic confidence over time. Success in exams and feedback from instructors helped them overcome fear. “After acing that course, I finally believed I could do well,” one student explained.

A developing sense of self-worth was evident in students who acknowledged their progress and embraced their limitations. “I’m not perfect, but I’ve come a long way,” one student reflected.

Lastly, future orientation—including career planning and goal clarity—helped students maintain motivation. “I remind myself this is a step toward the life I want. That keeps me going,” said a participant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored how first-generation college students in China perceive various forms of support and how these perceptions influence their emotional well-being. The findings revealed four overarching themes: academic and institutional support, family and social support, emotional challenges and coping, and identity and self-perception. Across these themes, participants emphasized the importance of accessible and empathetic faculty, effective advising, emotionally supportive families and peers, and environments that cultivate belonging and academic confidence. Notably, students’ emotional health was deeply shaped by their ability to manage stress, navigate impostor feelings, and maintain a future-oriented mindset. These results provide a nuanced understanding of the specific psychosocial factors that contribute to emotional resilience in FGCS populations.

The data demonstrated that accessible faculty and helpful academic advising significantly bolstered students’ confidence and reduced their emotional distress. Participants who described professors as approachable and attentive were more likely to report feelings of security and motivation. This aligns with previous findings that highlight the role of emotionally attuned faculty in enhancing students’ sense of belonging and reducing stress, especially among FGCS who often lack prior exposure to academic norms (Lawrie & Kim, 2024; Wong & Cheung, 2024). Similarly, effective advising helped students clarify academic goals and feel less overwhelmed, echoing findings that timely, individualized

guidance serves as a critical support mechanism during transitional periods (Cheng, 2024).

Institutional resources such as tutoring centers, mental health services, and career counseling were reported as essential lifelines. However, the emotional benefit of these resources depended largely on students’ perception of their accessibility and responsiveness. This supports earlier research that found the mere existence of support services is insufficient without proactive outreach and culturally sensitive framing (Nguyen et al., 2024; Trang et al., 2023). Peer academic support was also pivotal, particularly through collaborative study groups and informal mentoring. These connections not only improved academic performance but also mitigated feelings of isolation, confirming the importance of peer-driven networks in fostering psychological safety (Farias & Cameron, 2023).

Family and social support emerged as equally vital for emotional regulation and motivation. Although many participants’ parents had never attended college, their emotional encouragement and sacrifices instilled a sense of purpose. This mirrors previous research showing that FGCS often derive resilience from their family’s belief in education as a path to upward mobility, despite parents’ limited understanding of university systems (Yin & Zhao, 2024; Zang & Zhang, 2024). Emotional sharing with family—particularly during periods of stress—helped students recalibrate their internal emotional states. Likewise, close friendships on campus were described as protective buffers against emotional breakdown, supporting studies that identify strong social ties as a predictor of subjective well-being (Bing et al., 2023; Homoroc et al., 2022).

Participants articulated a range of emotional challenges, including stress, loneliness, academic pressure, self-doubt, and burnout. These stressors often stemmed from a lack of familiarity with academic expectations, the burden of representing one’s family, and the fear of failure. This is consistent with prior research noting that FGCS face heightened vulnerability to stressors due to their unique cultural and socioeconomic positions (Abbas, 2023; Rehr et al., 2022). Many students reported experiencing impostor feelings and questioning their right to occupy academic space. This finding echoes Farias and Cameron’s work on the emotional toll of impostor syndrome among FGCS, particularly those who internalize societal narratives of inadequacy (Farias & Cameron, 2023).

Despite these struggles, students demonstrated impressive emotional resilience and resourcefulness. Strategies such as journaling, exercise, and mindfulness

were commonly used to manage stress. These behaviors parallel coping mechanisms identified in other studies of emotionally intelligent college populations (Deepa, 2024; Trang et al., 2023). Furthermore, students who cultivated time management skills and learned to set boundaries reported lower levels of burnout. Such findings reinforce the importance of adaptive self-regulation strategies for sustaining psychological health in the face of chronic academic and financial pressures (Nguyen et al., 2024; Rombaoa et al., 2023).

The theme of identity and self-perception was central to participants' emotional experiences. Students who reported a strong sense of belonging—through cultural inclusion, recognition of shared struggles, or affiliation with clubs—tended to exhibit greater emotional well-being. This finding aligns with Lawrie and Kim's research, which suggests that emotional similarity and social identification reduce psychological stress and increase retention among FGCS (Lawrie & Kim, 2024). Similarly, the development of academic confidence through success and positive feedback led to a more stable self-concept, supporting previous conclusions that internalizing academic achievement is key to emotional adjustment (He & Tang, 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

Impostor syndrome and diminished self-worth, on the other hand, continued to plague many students throughout their college journey. Participants described comparing themselves unfavorably to peers, doubting their capabilities, and struggling to feel deserving of their academic opportunities. This internal conflict mirrors findings from other populations of FGCS who battle self-perception issues due to the lack of intergenerational academic role models (Martínez et al., 2022; Vienrich & Stone, 2022). Yet, students who reframed their experiences as progress rather than performance demonstrated a more future-oriented mindset, which helped anchor their emotional resilience (Wong & Cheung, 2024; Zang & Zhang, 2024).

Importantly, meaning-making emerged as a consistent theme across multiple domains. Students who contextualized their educational journey as a contribution to their families or as a stepping stone to social change reported greater optimism and emotional regulation. This is consistent with the findings of Zang and Zhang, who emphasized that a strong sense of life purpose mediates the effects of stress and contributes to psychological well-being (Zang & Zhang, 2024). For FGCS in China, education is often perceived as a generational investment, which

intensifies pressure but also fuels commitment and emotional growth.

Taken together, these findings underscore the complex interplay of institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors that shape the emotional lives of FGCS. They also highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping how support is perceived and internalized. For example, while Western models of well-being often emphasize autonomy and self-actualization, the experiences of Chinese FGCS are more relationally grounded, drawing on family loyalty and community obligation as sources of emotional meaning. This suggests that support interventions must be culturally attuned and tailored to the specific values and narratives of FGCS populations (DeVitre et al., 2022; Rausch et al., 2023).

While this study provides rich qualitative insights, it is not without limitations. The sample, though diverse in gender and academic discipline, was limited to 30 participants from universities in China, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to FGCS in other cultural or institutional contexts. Additionally, as with most qualitative research, the interpretation of data is subject to researcher bias despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and rigor. The reliance on self-reported data could also introduce social desirability effects, as participants may have shaped their narratives in response to perceived expectations during the interview process. Finally, the absence of longitudinal tracking means the findings reflect students' current perceptions and may not capture changes in emotional well-being or support systems over time.

Future research could expand on these findings by conducting longitudinal studies to track how perceived support and emotional well-being evolve over the course of college years. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts—such as first-generation students in Western, Southeast Asian, or African academic environments—could help identify both universal and culture-specific factors influencing FGCS experiences. Mixed-methods research combining qualitative interviews with quantitative assessments of psychological well-being, resilience, and academic outcomes could also provide a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, investigating the role of intersectional identities such as gender, socioeconomic status, and rural-urban origin within the FGCS population would deepen insight into the diverse challenges and strengths within this group.

Universities should prioritize building accessible and culturally responsive support systems tailored to the unique

needs of first-generation college students. Faculty and staff training in empathy, active listening, and inclusive advising can enhance students' trust and engagement with institutional resources. Peer mentorship programs should be expanded and formally structured to foster academic and emotional resilience. Mental health services must be proactively promoted and normalized, especially in ways that resonate with the values and concerns of FGCS. Lastly, curriculum design should incorporate opportunities for students to explore identity, resilience, and meaning-making within the context of their educational journey, fostering emotional growth alongside academic achievement.

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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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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