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Digital Brand Equity: Congruence and Purchase Intention in the Customer Journey (Review)

Dhewi Khodijah Hartono[1]✉, Azka Fajril Qirom[1], and I Made Bayu Dirgantara[1]

Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia[1]

ABSTRACT

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) examines how celebrity and influencer endorsements shape consumer purchase intention (CPI) across digital platforms. Reviewing 30 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, the analysis synthesizes key theoretical, relational, and behavioral mechanisms that drive endorsement effectiveness within the digital customer journey. Findings consistently show that source credibility, specifically attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, forms the core antecedent of CPI. Among all variables, brand-endorser congruence emerges as the strongest mediator, enabling endorsement cues to translate more effectively into favourable consumer evaluations and purchase-related decisions. Additional mechanisms such as emotional resonance, parasocial interaction, and social media engagement further strengthen endorsement impact in competitive digital markets. Grounded in the Source Credibility Model and Match-Up Hypothesis, this review proposes an integrated framework explaining how digital brand equity is constructed through congruence and credibility-based pathways. The study offers actionable implications for strategic endorser selection and highlights opportunities for future research, including longitudinal examinations and the emerging influence of virtual endorsers.

Keywords: *Brand Endorser Congruence, Celebrity Endorsement, Digital Customer Journey, Purchase Intention.*

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Dhewi Khodijah Hartono
Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia
contact: *dkhdhewi@gmail.com*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

The modern digital marketplace is characterized by intense competition, fragmented consumer attention, and extensive social media exposure, encouraging brands to adopt communication strategies that can attract and influence consumers effectively. Celebrity and influencer endorsements have consequently become important components of digital marketing because public figures can shape consumer perceptions, brand evaluations, and purchase-related responses. Previous studies have demonstrated that celebrity endorsement can influence purchase intention across different product and consumption contexts, including food, sports products, beauty products, and alcoholic beverages (Calvo-Porral et al., 2021; Rai et al., 2021; von Felbert & Breuer, 2021; Calvo-Porral et al., 2023). In digital environments, endorsement effectiveness is therefore increasingly connected to how consumers perceive both the characteristics of the endorser and the relationship between the endorser and the endorsed brand.

One important explanation is provided by the Source Credibility Model, which emphasizes attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise as key dimensions of an effective communication source. Previous evidence indicates that these three credibility dimensions can significantly increase consumers' purchase intention in social media influencer contexts (Weismueller et al., 2020). Recent empirical studies indicate that these dimensions can affect consumer attitudes, brand perceptions, and purchase intention, although their effects are not necessarily consistent across contexts. Trustworthiness, for example, has been identified as an important factor in online consumer responses, while the effects of attractiveness and expertise may vary according to product category and consumer characteristics (Calvo-Porral et al., 2021; Molelekeng & Dondolo, 2021; Akoglu & Özbek, 2024). This suggests that simply selecting a popular or attractive endorser may not be sufficient to generate favorable consumer responses.

In addition to source credibility, the Match-Up Hypothesis highlights the importance of congruence between an endorser and a brand or product. Endorser–brand and influencer product congruence can strengthen consumers' evaluations of the promoted product and contribute to more favorable advertising responses (Kim & Kim, 2021; Rai et al., 2021). The importance of congruence is also reflected in research showing that self-concept and advertising appeal influence how consumers respond to traditional celebrities and online stars (Shi et al., 2021). More recent evidence shows that product–endorser fit can influence the effectiveness of social media influencers and traditional celebrities, with identification and credibility representing important mechanisms underlying endorsement effectiveness (Schouten et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2025). Similarly, consumer attitudes and purchase intentions toward celebrity self-brands have been associated with congruence, authenticity, and celebrity involvement (Tseng & Wang, 2023).

Digital endorsement effectiveness also involves relational and emotional mechanisms. Social media can create perceived closeness between endorsers and followers, allowing parasocial interaction to influence consumer attitudes and purchase intention (Um, 2022). In live-streaming environments, emotional resonance can further connect influencer characteristics with consumers' buying behavior (Wen et al., 2025), while emerging research on virtual idols demonstrates the relevance of parasocial interaction to brand attitude and purchase intention (Yu et al., 2025). These findings indicate that endorsement operates through interconnected cognitive, emotional, and relational mechanisms rather than through a single source characteristic.

Despite the growing body of research, existing studies remain fragmented because source credibility, congruence, emotional responses, and relational mechanisms are often examined separately, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive synthesis of influencer marketing research across the consumer decision journey (Vrontis et al., 2021). Therefore, an integrated synthesis is needed to clarify how these factors collectively shape consumer purchase intention within the digital customer journey. This study addresses this gap through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 30 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025. The review aims to synthesize evidence concerning the roles of endorser characteristics, brand–endorser congruence, and related psychological mechanisms in influencing consumer purchase intention, while integrating the findings within the Source Credibility Model and Match-Up Hypothesis.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

The Source Credibility Framework: A Finding of Inconsistency

The Source Credibility Model (SCM), which posits that an endorser's effectiveness relies on "Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise", is a foundational concept tested across the 30 articles. However, a primary finding of this SLR is the significant inconsistency in the predictive power of these attributes in digital contexts. Trustworthiness consistently emerges as the strongest and most dependable predictor of favorable consumer responses across a wide range of settings (Calvo-Porral et al., 2021; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021; Akoglu & Ozbek, 2024; Hossain et al., 2025). Expertise exhibits the greatest degree of variability. Some studies report its effect as "almost negligible" or "non-influential" (Akoglu & Ozbek, 2024; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). Yet, other research identifies it as a pivotal determinant, particularly in food related endorsements (Calvo Porral et al., 2021) and live streaming environments (Wen et al., 2025). Attractiveness also produces inconsistent findings. It shows no significant impact on consumer attitudes in the context of beauty products (Molelekeng & Dondolo,2021) and wine (Calvo Porral et al., 2023). In contrast, it becomes influential in categories such as food (Calvo Porral et al., 2021) and natural beauty care (Hossain et al., 2025). This synthesis indicates that the SCM framework does not operate uniformly; instead, its explanatory power is highly dependent on the contextual conditions in which it is applied.

The Match Up Hypothesis: Congruence, Endorser Type, and Self Concept

The abstract for this SLR identified "Brand-Endorser Congruence" as the "most significant variable". The full analysis confirms its significance but reveals its role is complex and deeply intertwined with endorser type and consumer psychology.Product Endorser Fit: The alignment between the endorser's image and the product emerges as a crucial determinant of endorsement effectiveness. Chen et al. (2025) demonstrated that this fit functions as a moderating factor; traditional celebrities showed superior performance compared to SMIs in high fit conditions, whereas no significant difference was observed when the product endorser fit was low. Self-Congruity: The literature also identifies a deeper underlying mechanism through self-congruity, the perceived alignment between the endorser and the consumer's self-concept. Shi et al. (2021) highlighted an important psychological distinction:

Traditional Celebrities are perceived as socially distant and tend to activate the consumer's ideal self (the person they aspire to become). They are most persuasive when associated with symbolic appeals. Online Stars (SMIs/KOLs) are viewed as relatable individuals or even friends, thereby activating the consumer's actual self (the person they currently are). They demonstrate greater effectiveness in endorsing functional appeals. Interpersonal Congruence: For SMIs specifically, endorsement effectiveness is strongly influenced by perceived interpersonal closeness. Homophily (perceived similarity) and relational closeness constitute key antecedents of the parasocial relationships that subsequently drive purchase intentions (Taillon et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2025).

Synthesis of Mediating and Moderating Pathways

A central finding of this SLR is that the path from endorser attributes to "consumer purchase intention" (CPI) is almost entirely indirect and mediated, or sometimes moderated. The abstract's premise of a "validated, multi-dimensional model" is supported by a rich network of pathways identified in the literature. Endorser as a Moderator: A recurring finding is that the endorser often acts as a moderating variable. For example, research on impulse buying indicates that celebrity endorsement enhances the positive association between social presence in live shopping and consumers' impulse buying tendencies (Li et al., 2022). Similarly, Hameed et al. (2023) identified that celebrity endorsement moderates the relationship between brand awareness and consumer attitude.

Key Mediating Pathways: The impact of the endorser operates through several essential psychological mechanisms: Attitude (via TPB & SDT): One of the most frequently cited mediators is Consumer Attitude (Molelekeng & Dondolo,2021; Hameed et al., 2023; Tseng & Wang, 2023). Khan et al. (2022) explicitly employ the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Self Determination Theory (SDT), finding that Attitude is the most influential determinant of intention. This attitude is shaped by Subjective Norms often conveyed by endorsers and by autonomous motivation.

Emotional States (via SOR/PAD): Within live streaming environments, the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework is predominant. Endorser attributes (Stimulus) evoke internal affective responses (Organism), specifically Pleasure, Arousal, and Trust. These emotional states then serve as full mediators linking the stimulus to consumers' impulse buying intentions (Response) (Wen et al., 2025). Parasocial Interaction (PSI): On social media platforms, endorser effectiveness is strongly shaped by Parasocial Interaction. Such interaction cultivates a perceived relationship between the audience and the endorser (Um, 2022), which subsequently enhances both attitude toward the content and purchase intention (Yu et al., 2025). Brand Related Outcomes: The influence of endorsers is also mediated through brand related perceptions, including Brand Credibility (Rai et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2025), Perceived Quality (Hossain et al., 2025), Brand Image Transfer (Rai et al., 2021), Brand Awareness (Hameed et al., 2023), and eWOM (Molelekeng & Dondolo,2021).

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence related to celebrity endorsers, perceived fit, and buying purchase intentions. The review protocol was designed to support transparency and replicability through clearly defined stages of sampling, data collection, screening, and thematic analysis. The target population consisted of empirical research articles indexed in the Scopus database. The search strategy used the keywords "Celebrity Endorsers," "Perceived Fit," AND "Buying Purchase Intentions." Studies were included if they: (1) were published between 2021 and 2025; (2) appeared in peer-reviewed Q1 or Q2 journals; and (3) empirically examined constructs related to the Source Credibility model or Match-Up hypothesis, including congruence.

The literature selection process was conducted using the Watase Uake platform and the PRISMA framework (O'Dea et al., 2021). Initially, 782 records were identified from Scopus. No duplicates were removed. Subsequently, 482 records outside the 2021–2025 period, 59 records that did not meet the Q1/Q2 requirement, and 2 records without abstracts were excluded, leaving 239 records for screening. Screening excluded 203 records, resulting in 36 reports sought for retrieval. Eleven reports could not be retrieved, leaving 25 reports for eligibility assessment. An additional five studies were identified from other sources, producing a final sample of 30 studies.

Data were extracted using a standardized form covering authorship, publication year, methodology, key variables, and principal findings. The selected studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis, focusing on the pathways through which celebrity endorsement influences purchase intentions. Particular attention was given to source attributes, perceived congruence, and their reported relationships with buying purchase intentions. The findings were subsequently interpreted within the Source Credibility and Match-Up theoretical frameworks to develop a multidimensional synthesis of endorsement influence. The PRISMA selection process is presented in Figure 1.

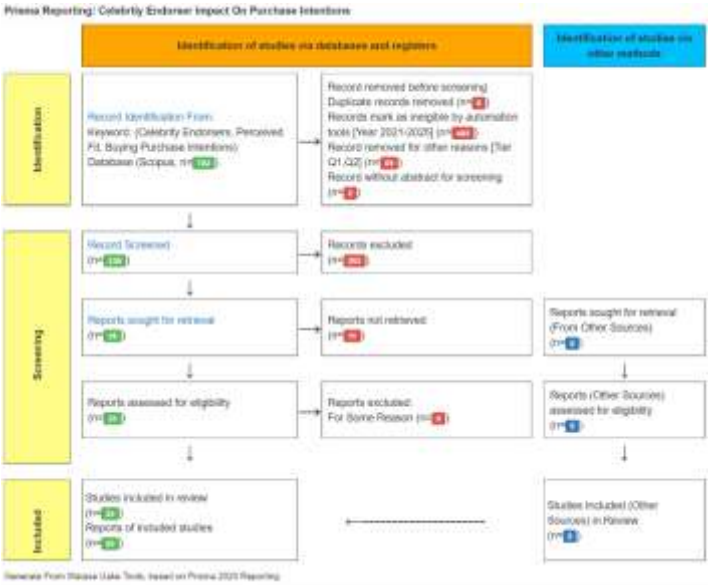


Figure 1. PRISMA Analysis Report

4. | RESULTS

The systematic review of thirty empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 reveals consistent evidence linking celebrity and influencer endorsement with consumer cognition, affect, and buying behavior throughout digital customer journeys. The studies cover diverse product categories, including natural beauty and skincare products (Hossain et al., 2025), eco-friendly and organic food (Khan et al., 2022), sports merchandising and athletic brands (von Felbert & Breuer, 2021), beer and wine consumption (Calvo-Porral et al., 2023), and self-branded influencer products (Wen et al., 2025). Despite differences in context, the studies consistently examine source credibility, perceived congruence, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and emotional engagement as factors shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The evidence largely represents Asian markets, including China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, with additional studies from European and North American markets.

Structural equation modeling is the dominant analytical method across the reviewed studies. Many studies employ Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) because it is suitable for prediction-oriented models involving complex mediating relationships and non-normal data. Hossain et al. (2025), for example, use PLS-SEM to examine the effects of celebrity credibility and attractiveness on trustworthiness, perceived quality, and purchase intention within SOR and elaboration-likelihood frameworks. Khan et al. (2022) similarly apply PLS-SEM to examine the relationships among extrinsic motivation, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, purchase intention, and actual adoption of organic food. Research on eco-endorsement and green

products also applies variance-based SEM to assess mediating roles of perceived eco-friendliness, product attitudes, and endorsement credibility.

A second methodological group applies Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) to confirm theory-driven models and assess overall model fit. Calvo-Porral et al. (2023), for example, examine beer and wine endorsement using fit indicators such as χ^2, RMSEA, CFI, TLI, GFI, and AGFI. Von Felbert and Breuer (2021) similarly use CB-SEM to examine relationships among celebrity personality traits, endorser-brand congruence, brand credibility, transferred brand image, and purchase intention. Experimental studies provide another important methodological approach. Shi et al. (2021) use factorial experiments and ANOVA to examine how online stars and traditional celebrities interact with advertising appeal and consumer self-concept. Chen et al. (2025) apply hierarchical regression and ANCOVA to examine moderating effects of fit, popularity, similarity, and self-congruity. Fan et al. (2023) use a 3×2 factorial design to examine the persuasive effectiveness of AI-generated virtual idols in relation to product involvement and credibility.

Across the thirty studies, source credibility particularly attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise generally influences consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. However, expertise does not always produce positive effects. Wen et al. (2025) found that highly expert endorsers may be perceived as commercial persuasion agents rather than authentic product users, resulting in weaker or negative associations in some contexts. Endorser-brand congruence also emerges as a central mediating mechanism. Von Felbert and Breuer (2021) demonstrate that congruence strengthens endorsed brand credibility and facilitates image transfer, which subsequently predicts purchase intention. Similar evidence is reported in beauty and green cosmetics research, where congruence strengthens the effects of perceived authenticity and credibility on product attitudes (Hossain et al., 2025).

Emotional and relational mechanisms further shape consumer behavior. Wen et al. (2025) found that professionalism, popularity, attractiveness, and entertainment value influence pleasure, arousal, and trust, which subsequently affect impulse and planned purchase intentions. Emotional resonance can therefore mediate the relationship between influencer cues and impulse buying. Calvo-Porral et al. (2023) found that credibility may outweigh attractiveness among young female consumers, while online reviews can be more influential than celebrity cues, demonstrating that endorsement effectiveness varies across consumer groups and contexts.

Motivational and behavioral theories also explain endorsement effectiveness. Khan et al. (2022) found that external and integrated regulation influence attitudes toward organic food, which subsequently predict purchase intention and actual buying behavior within an integrated SDT-TPB framework. However, several studies report unsupported hypotheses, including insignificant effects of attractiveness or brand loyalty in particular contexts. These findings indicate that endorsement effectiveness

depends on consumer psychological states, product characteristics, and contextual conditions.

The word cloud generated from the variables extracted from all thirty studies provides an additional descriptive representation of these patterns. While the statistical synthesis highlights credibility, congruence, emotional mechanisms, and behavioral antecedents, the visualization illustrates the frequency and prominence of these constructs across the reviewed literature. It also highlights complementary variables such as parasocial relationships, emotional responses, and sustainable consumption motivations. Overall, the extracted variables demonstrate that celebrity and influencer effectiveness is shaped by interconnected cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioral mechanisms within digital brand-building environments.



Figure 2. Word Cloud of Extracted Variables from the Systematic Literature Review

Based on Figure 2, the word cloud generated from the variable extraction offers a clear visual synthesis of the conceptual structure represented across the thirty studies. The most prominent terms, such as purchase intention, credibility, congruence, brand credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, highlight the centrality of source credibility and fit-based constructs within contemporary digital endorsement research. The dominance of purchase intention reflects its role as the primary dependent variable across empirical investigations, confirming that endorsement research continues to anchor itself in behavioral outcomes. The prominence of constructs such as credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise underscores the continuing relevance of the Source Credibility Model in explaining how consumers process endorsement stimuli.

The presence of terms such as congruence, endorser–brand congruence, self-congruence, and brand–product fit indicates the critical role of match-up effects in digital persuasion contexts. Consumers increasingly evaluate the authenticity and

relevance of endorsers, making congruence a crucial mediator between source cues and downstream outcomes such as brand equity, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. Emotional constructs including pleasure, arousal, hedonic attitude, and impulse buying behavior, signal the integration of affective processing theories, particularly within live-streaming and real-time interaction environments where emotional resonance becomes a potent predictor of impulsive consumption.

Relational variables such as parasocial relationship, companionship, self-disclosure, and attention to celebrity endorsers illustrate how digital endorsement effects operate within social and interpersonal frameworks. These relational cues complement credibility and congruence by shaping intimacy, trust, and involvement. Meanwhile, variables related to sustainability such as organic food purchase intention, eco-friendly perception, and sustainable consumption, demonstrate the growing intersection between endorsement and ethical consumption motivations. Finally, constructs such as information usefulness, electronic word of mouth, and online reviews show the expanding convergence between celebrity influence and peer-generated digital information. Together, the word cloud and statistical findings present a multidimensional landscape of endorsement effectiveness wherein cognitive evaluations, emotional activation, relational engagement, and contextual relevance operate jointly to shape consumer purchase intention and behavior in digital environments.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that celebrity and influencer endorsement influences consumer purchase intention through interconnected cognitive, emotional, relational, and contextual mechanisms. Rather than functioning solely as persuasive communication tools, endorsers contribute to how consumers evaluate brands and products through credibility, congruence, authenticity, and social interaction. This finding is consistent with research showing that celebrity endorsement can influence brand credibility, image transfer, and purchase intention (Rai et al., 2021), while social media endorsement can shape consumer attitudes through perceived relationships with endorsers (Um, 2022).

The findings also reinforce the relevance of the Source Credibility Model, particularly the dimensions of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. However, the reviewed evidence indicates that these attributes do not produce uniform effects across different contexts. Trustworthiness appears to be a relatively consistent factor in shaping favorable consumer responses (Akoglu & Özbek, 2024), whereas the effects of attractiveness and expertise vary according to product category and consumer characteristics. Calvo-Porral et al. (2021) found that celebrity endorsement characteristics influence food consumption behavior, while Molelekeng and Dondolo (2021) reported differences in the effects of endorser attributes on purchase intentions. These variations suggest that consumers evaluate endorsement credibility in relation to

the specific product and marketing context rather than relying on a single endorser characteristic.

A particularly important finding is the role of brand–endorser congruence, which supports the Match-Up Hypothesis. The reviewed studies indicate that alignment between the endorser and the brand or product can strengthen credibility and facilitate the transfer of the endorser's image to the brand (Rai et al., 2021). Shi et al. (2021) further demonstrated that the effectiveness of online stars and traditional celebrities is related to consumers' self-concept and advertising appeal. More recent evidence shows that product endorser fit can also influence the relative effectiveness of social media influencers and traditional celebrities (Chen et al., 2025). Therefore, endorsement effectiveness depends not only on who delivers the message but also on whether the endorser is perceived as relevant and compatible with the promoted product.

Emotional and relational mechanisms provide another important pathway. In digital environments, consumers may develop perceived social relationships with endorsers, which can strengthen engagement and purchase-related responses. Um (2022) highlights the role of parasocial interaction in social media endorsement, while recent evidence further indicates that authenticity and perceived similarity can contribute to parasocial relationships and subsequently influence brand credibility and purchase intention (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Yu et al. (2025) similarly demonstrates the relevance of parasocial interaction to brand attitude and purchase intention in the context of virtual idols. Similarly, Wen et al. (2025) shows that emotional resonance can mediate the relationship between influencer characteristics and buying behavior in live-streaming environments. Perceived authenticity also represents an important consideration because consumers may respond differently depending on how genuine and consistent an influencer is perceived to be. The role of authenticity therefore complements credibility and congruence in explaining consumers' purchase-related responses (Ren et al., 2023). These findings indicate that digital endorsement increasingly operates through emotional engagement and perceived interpersonal closeness in addition to cognitive evaluation.

Overall, the evidence supports an integrated perspective in which credibility and congruence provide important foundations, while emotional resonance and parasocial interaction strengthen the pathway toward purchase intention. The findings also indicate that endorsement effectiveness remains context-dependent, varying across products, platforms, and consumer characteristics. Thus, the literature supports extending traditional endorsement theories toward a multidimensional digital framework that considers cognitive evaluation, emotional responses, relational engagement, and contextual fit simultaneously. This interpretation is consistent with the broader evidence synthesized across the 30 studies in the review.

6. | CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review concludes that celebrity and influencer endorsements influence consumer purchase intention through a combination of

cognitive, emotional, relational, and contextual mechanisms. The findings indicate that source credibility, particularly trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, remains an important foundation of endorsement effectiveness. However, the influence of these attributes varies depending on product category, platform, and consumer characteristics. Brand endorser congruence emerges as a central mechanism connecting endorser characteristics with consumer responses. A strong alignment between the endorser, brand, and product can strengthen perceived credibility, authenticity, and positive brand evaluations, thereby supporting purchase intention. In addition, emotional resonance and parasocial interaction demonstrate that endorsement effectiveness in digital environments extends beyond rational evaluation. Consumers' emotional responses, perceived closeness, and engagement with endorsers can further strengthen their behavioral intentions.

The review therefore indicates that digital endorsement should be understood as a multidimensional process rather than as the direct effect of a single endorser attribute. Effective endorsement involves the interaction of credibility, congruence, emotional engagement, relational connection, and contextual relevance throughout the digital customer journey. The study is limited by the methodological diversity and contextual concentration of the reviewed studies, as well as the prevalence of cross-sectional and self-reported research designs. Future research should consider longitudinal, cross-cultural, and multimethod approaches, particularly in emerging areas such as virtual influencers, AI-generated endorsers, and immersive digital commerce. Overall, this review provides an integrated perspective for understanding how endorsement strategies contribute to consumer purchase intention and digital brand-building processes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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