



Original Article

Emotional Regulation and Coping Strategies as Predictors of Perceived Stress among Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

Stress has emerged as a significant psychological concern among postgraduate students, driven by escalating academic workloads, competitive performance expectations, career-related uncertainty, and evolving social and personal responsibilities. Prolonged exposure to stress during this critical developmental period can adversely affect psychological well-being, academic performance, and overall quality of life. Emotional regulation strategies and coping mechanisms are widely recognized as key psychological resources that influence how individuals perceive, experience, and manage stress. However, limited empirical research has systematically examined their combined predictive role among postgraduate populations. The present study investigates the relationship between emotional regulation strategies, coping styles, and perceived stress levels among postgraduate students. A quantitative, correlational research design was employed, and data were collected from a sample of 180 postgraduate students aged between 21 and 30 years, drawn from diverse academic disciplines. Standardized psychometric tools were used for assessment, including the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) to measure stress levels, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) to assess cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, and the Brief COPE Inventory to evaluate adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies.

Statistical analyses comprised descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and multiple regression analysis to determine the predictive value of emotional regulation and coping strategies on perceived stress. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between cognitive reappraisal and perceived stress, indicating that students who effectively reframe stressful situations experience lower stress levels. In contrast, expressive suppression demonstrated a significant positive correlation with perceived stress. Furthermore, adaptive coping strategies—such as problem-focused coping, positive reframing, and seeking social support—were found to be significant negative predictors of stress. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies—including avoidance, denial, and behavioral disengagement—significantly predicted higher levels of perceived stress.

Overall, the study underscores the critical role of emotional regulation abilities and coping strategies in shaping stress experiences among postgraduate students. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing cognitive reappraisal and promoting adaptive coping skills may be effective in reducing stress within academic settings. Implications for psychological counseling services, stress-management programs, and institutional mental health policies are discussed, along with recommendations for future research focusing on longitudinal designs and intervention-based approaches.

Keywords: Emotional regulation, coping strategies, perceived stress, postgraduate students, psychological well-being.

Introduction

Stress is a universal and multifaceted psychological phenomenon that arises when individuals perceive that environmental demands exceed their available coping resources. It is an inevitable aspect of modern life and has become increasingly prominent in academic contexts, particularly within higher education. Academic stress is not merely a transient response to examinations or deadlines; rather, it often represents a sustained psychological condition shaped by academic workload, performance expectations, interpersonal relationships, and future-oriented concerns. When unmanaged, stress can significantly impair cognitive functioning, emotional stability, and overall psychological well-being. Postgraduate students constitute a particularly vulnerable population with regard to stress exposure.

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Unlike undergraduate students, postgraduates are often required to manage complex academic responsibilities such as advanced coursework, research demands, thesis or dissertation completion, publication pressures, and time-bound academic milestones. These academic challenges are frequently compounded by additional stressors, including financial constraints, competitive academic environments, role transitions, family responsibilities, and uncertainty regarding career prospects. The cumulative effect of these stressors can result in chronic stress, which has been empirically linked to adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, burnout, sleep disturbances, and diminished academic performance.

From a psychological perspective, the experience of stress is not solely determined by external demands but is significantly influenced by how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to these demands. This subjective appraisal process underscores the importance of individual difference variables, particularly emotional regulation and coping strategies, in understanding stress outcomes. Emotional regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence the type, intensity, duration, and expression of emotions they experience. It plays a central role in psychological adjustment and mental health by shaping emotional responses to stressful situations.

Gross's process model of emotional regulation provides a widely accepted theoretical framework for understanding how individuals regulate emotions. According to this model, emotional regulation strategies can be broadly categorized based on the stage at which they intervene in the emotion-generative process. Cognitive reappraisal, an antecedent-focused strategy, involves modifying one's interpretation of a situation to alter its emotional impact. Research consistently suggests that cognitive reappraisal is associated with better psychological outcomes, including lower stress levels, enhanced emotional well-being, and improved interpersonal functioning. In contrast, expressive suppression, a response-focused strategy, involves inhibiting the outward expression of emotions after they have been generated. While suppression may be socially adaptive in certain contexts, it has often been linked to increased psychological distress, reduced emotional clarity, and heightened stress.



In addition to emotional regulation, coping strategies represent another critical psychological mechanism through which individuals manage stress. Coping strategies encompass the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed to deal with internal and external demands that are appraised as stressful. These strategies are commonly classified into adaptive (or problem-focused and emotion-focused coping) and maladaptive coping styles. Adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving, positive reframing, acceptance, and seeking social support, are generally associated with effective stress management and psychological resilience. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies, including avoidance, denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement, tend to exacerbate stress and contribute to negative mental health outcomes.

Although a substantial body of research has independently examined stress, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, relatively fewer studies have explored their combined and predictive role in determining perceived stress levels among postgraduate students. This gap is particularly evident in developing academic contexts, where institutional mental health resources may be limited and cultural factors influence emotional expression and coping behaviors. Moreover, most existing studies have focused on undergraduate populations, leaving postgraduate students comparatively underrepresented in empirical research despite their heightened vulnerability to stress.

Understanding the interplay between emotional regulation strategies, coping mechanisms, and perceived stress among postgraduate students is essential for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical standpoint, examining these relationships contributes to a more integrated understanding of stress processes within academic settings. From a practical perspective, such insights can inform the development of targeted psychological interventions, stress-management programs, and counseling services tailored to the specific needs of postgraduate students. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the predictive relationship between emotional regulation strategies, coping strategies, and perceived stress among postgraduate students, with the aim of contributing to evidence-based mental health practices in higher education.

Review of Literature

The review of literature serves to contextualize the present study within the broader body of psychological research and to establish a theoretical and empirical foundation for examining perceived stress, emotional regulation, and coping strategies among postgraduate students. This section critically reviews existing studies, identifies consistent patterns, and highlights research gaps that necessitate further investigation.

1. Perceived Stress

Perceived stress is defined as the degree to which individuals evaluate situations in their lives as stressful, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. Unlike objective stress, which focuses on the presence of external stressors, perceived stress

emphasizes the subjective interpretation and appraisal of these stressors. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping provides a comprehensive framework for understanding perceived stress by emphasizing the dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment.



According to the transactional model, stress arises through two primary cognitive appraisal processes. Primary appraisal involves evaluating whether an event is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful, whereas secondary appraisal involves assessing one's available coping resources to manage the perceived threat. When individuals appraise a situation as exceeding their coping resources, stress is experienced. This model underscores the role of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping stress perception, making perceived stress a highly individualized experience.

Research conducted across diverse academic settings consistently reports high levels of perceived stress among postgraduate students. Factors such as academic workload, research expectations, thesis deadlines, publication pressure, time constraints, and performance evaluation contribute significantly to stress perception. Additionally, postgraduate students often face non-academic stressors, including financial instability, family expectations, role conflict, and uncertainty related to employment and career progression. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to high perceived stress is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, reduced motivation, and impaired academic functioning. These findings highlight perceived stress as a critical variable in understanding postgraduate students' mental health.

2. Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is a fundamental psychological process that influences how individuals experience, express, and manage emotions in response to environmental demands. Gross (1998) conceptualized emotional regulation as the processes through which individuals influence the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions. Emotional regulation is particularly relevant in academic contexts, where students frequently encounter emotionally demanding situations such as examinations, evaluations, deadlines, and feedback.

Gross's process model of emotional regulation distinguishes between antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies based on the timing of their implementation in the emotion-generative process. Antecedent-focused strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, are employed before the emotional response is fully activated. Cognitive reappraisal involves altering one's interpretation of a situation in order to change its emotional impact. Numerous studies have demonstrated that cognitive reappraisal is associated with positive psychological outcomes, including reduced stress, lower negative affect, higher life satisfaction, and better emotional well-being. Individuals who frequently use cognitive reappraisal tend to adopt flexible thinking patterns and perceive stressful situations as manageable challenges rather than uncontrollable threats.

In contrast, expressive suppression is a response-focused emotional regulation strategy that involves inhibiting the outward expression of emotions after they have already been generated. Although suppression may be used to maintain social harmony or avoid conflict, research indicates that habitual use of expressive suppression is associated with increased physiological arousal, emotional exhaustion, reduced emotional awareness, and heightened stress. Studies have found that individuals who rely heavily on expressive suppression report higher levels of perceived stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. In academic settings, suppression may prevent effective emotional processing, thereby intensifying stress over time.

3. Coping Strategies

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed to manage internal and external demands that are appraised as stressful. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described coping as a dynamic process that varies across situations and individuals. Coping strategies play a critical role in determining whether stress results in psychological growth or distress.

Coping strategies are commonly categorized into adaptive and maladaptive forms. Adaptive coping strategies include problem-focused coping (e.g., planning, problem-solving, time management), emotion-focused coping (e.g., acceptance, positive reframing, emotional expression), and support-seeking behaviors. These strategies are generally associated with effective stress management, emotional resilience, and better psychological adjustment. Empirical evidence suggests that postgraduate students who engage in adaptive coping strategies report lower levels of perceived stress, higher academic satisfaction, and improved mental health outcomes.

Maladaptive coping strategies, on the other hand, include avoidance, denial, behavioral disengagement, self-blame, and substance use. Although these strategies may provide short-term relief from emotional distress, they often fail to address the underlying stressors and may intensify stress in the long term. Research has consistently shown that maladaptive coping

strategies are positively associated with higher perceived stress, anxiety, depression, and academic burnout. Among postgraduate students, reliance on maladaptive coping has been linked to procrastination, decreased academic productivity, and psychological distress.

4. Emotional Regulation, Coping, and Stress

Contemporary research suggests that emotional regulation strategies influence the selection and effectiveness of coping strategies, thereby shaping stress perception. Individuals who employ adaptive emotional regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, are more likely to engage in constructive coping behaviors, including problem-solving and positive reframing. This combination has been associated with lower levels of perceived stress and better psychological well-being.

Conversely, individuals who rely on maladaptive emotional regulation strategies, such as expressive suppression, are more likely to engage in avoidance-based or maladaptive coping strategies. This pattern has been linked to heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced psychological adjustment. Despite growing evidence supporting these relationships, relatively few studies have examined emotional regulation, coping strategies, and perceived stress simultaneously, particularly among postgraduate student populations.

Furthermore, most existing studies have been conducted in Western academic contexts, limiting their generalizability to developing educational settings. Cultural norms related to emotional expression and coping may significantly influence these relationships. Therefore, an integrated examination of emotional regulation, coping strategies, and perceived stress among postgraduate students is necessary to address these gaps and contribute to culturally relevant stress-management interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To assess the level of perceived stress among postgraduate students.
2. To examine the relationship between emotional regulation strategies, namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, and perceived stress.
3. To analyze the association between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies and perceived stress.
4. To determine the extent to which emotional regulation strategies and coping strategies predict perceived stress among postgraduate students.

Hypotheses

Based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- **H1:** Cognitive reappraisal will show a significant negative correlation with perceived stress.
- **H2:** Expressive suppression will show a significant positive correlation with perceived stress.
- **H3:** Adaptive coping strategies will significantly and negatively predict perceived stress.
- **H4:** Maladaptive coping strategies will significantly and positively predict perceived stress.

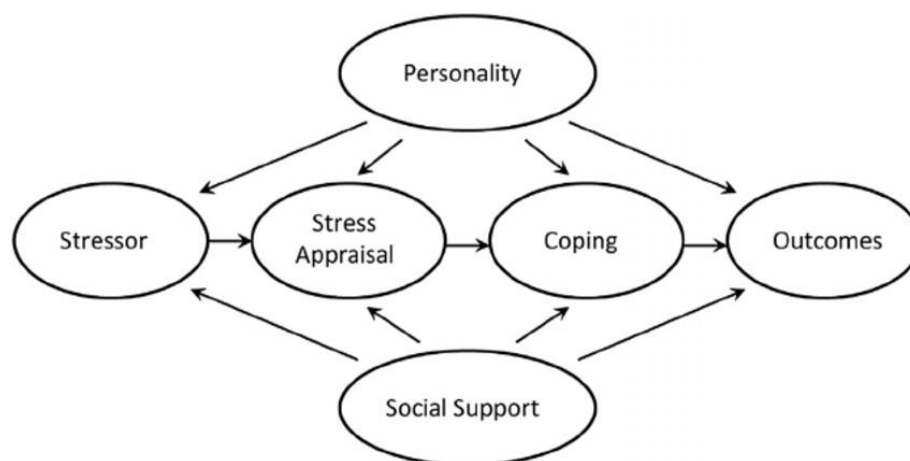
Methodology

1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationships among emotional regulation strategies, coping strategies, and perceived stress. This design was selected as it allows for the systematic examination of associations and predictive relationships between variables without experimental manipulation.

2. Sample

The sample consisted of 180 postgraduate students, including 92 males and 88 females, aged between 21 and 30 years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling from various universities. This sampling method was deemed appropriate for ensuring the inclusion of individuals who met the specific criteria of being enrolled in postgraduate programs. The sample size was considered adequate for statistical analyses such as correlation and multiple regression.



3. Instruments

The following standardized tools were used for data collection:

- **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10):** Measures the extent to which individuals perceive their lives as stressful over the past month.
- **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ):** Assesses emotional regulation strategies, specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.
- **Brief COPE Inventory:** Measures a wide range of coping strategies, categorized into adaptive and maladaptive coping styles for analytical purposes.

All instruments have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties, including reliability and validity, in previous studies.

4. Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval, participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants completed the questionnaires either online or in paper-and-pencil format. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and participation was entirely voluntary.

5. Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and study variables. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine relationships among variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive role of emotional regulation and coping strategies in explaining perceived stress among postgraduate students.

Results

The present chapter details the statistical outcomes of the study and provides an in-depth interpretation of the findings. The results are presented in a structured manner to address the research objectives and test the hypotheses formulated earlier. The analyses include descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to understand the distribution, central tendency, and variability of the study variables among postgraduate students. As shown in Table 1, the mean perceived stress score ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 6.2$) indicates that the participants experienced moderate to moderately high levels of stress. This suggests that postgraduate students routinely perceive academic and life demands as taxing and challenging.

The mean score for cognitive reappraisal ($M = 28.1$, $SD = 5.4$) reflects a moderate-to-high usage of adaptive emotional regulation strategies, suggesting that many students attempt to cognitively reinterpret stressful situations. However, the presence of expressive suppression ($M = 16.9$, $SD = 4.8$) indicates that a considerable proportion of students also rely on inhibiting emotional expression, which may contribute to internalized stress.

Adaptive coping strategies showed a relatively high mean score ($M = 42.3$, $SD = 7.1$), indicating frequent engagement in constructive coping behaviors such as planning, problem-solving, and positive reframing. At the same time, the mean score for maladaptive coping ($M = 26.7$, $SD = 6.5$) reveals that avoidance-based and disengagement strategies are also prevalent, highlighting variability in coping responses within the postgraduate population.

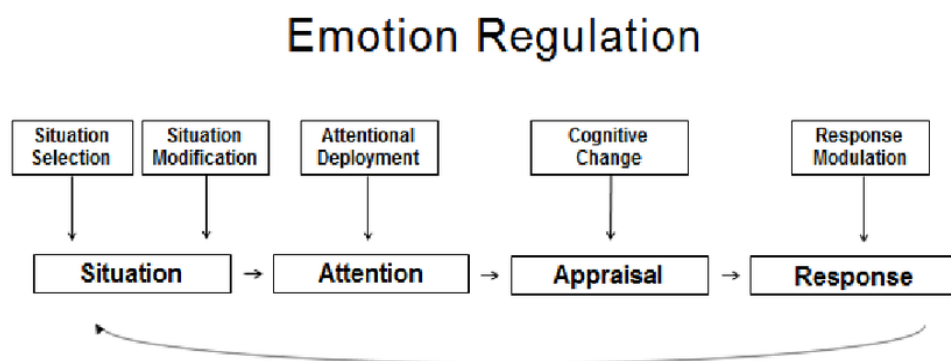
These descriptive findings suggest that postgraduate students employ a mixture of adaptive and maladaptive psychological strategies, which may differentially influence their experience of stress.

2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships among emotional regulation strategies, coping strategies, and perceived stress. As illustrated in Figure 1, statistically significant correlations were observed among the major variables.

Cognitive reappraisal was significantly and negatively correlated with perceived stress ($r = -0.46$, $p < .01$), indicating a **moderate inverse relationship**. This finding suggests that students who engage more frequently in reappraisal tend to perceive stressful situations as less overwhelming. This supports the notion that cognitive reinterpretation plays a buffering role against stress.

Expressive suppression demonstrated a significant positive correlation with perceived stress ($r = 0.39$, $p < .01$), indicating that greater reliance on suppressing emotions is associated with increased stress levels. This result aligns with the theoretical view that suppression may reduce emotional expression but does not alleviate internal emotional arousal, thereby intensifying stress.



Adaptive coping strategies were negatively correlated with perceived stress, whereas maladaptive coping strategies were positively correlated. These relationships underscore the importance of coping style selection in shaping stress perception. Overall,

the correlation analysis provides preliminary evidence supporting the hypothesized relationships among emotional regulation, coping, and stress.

3. Regression Analysis

To further examine the predictive power of emotional regulation and coping strategies, a multiple regression analysis was performed with perceived stress as the dependent variable. The predictors included cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, adaptive coping, and maladaptive coping.

The regression model was statistically significant and explained 48% of the total variance in perceived stress ($R^2 = 0.48$), indicating a strong combined effect of emotional regulation and coping variables. This suggests that nearly half of the variation in stress levels among postgraduate students can be explained by these psychological factors.

Maladaptive coping emerged as the strongest positive predictor of perceived stress ($\beta = 0.41$), highlighting its substantial role in exacerbating stress. Adaptive coping ($\beta = -0.35$) and cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -0.32$) were significant negative predictors, confirming their protective function. Expressive suppression ($\beta = 0.27$) also significantly predicted higher stress levels. These findings emphasize that while both emotional regulation and coping independently influence stress, their combined impact provides a more comprehensive explanation of stress experiences among postgraduate students.

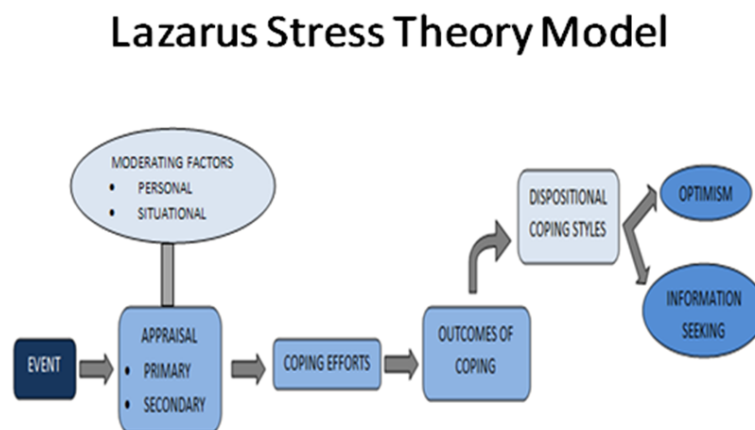
Discussion

The findings of the present study provide robust empirical support for the proposed hypotheses and align well with established theoretical frameworks in stress and emotion research. The negative association between cognitive reappraisal and perceived stress supports Gross's process model of emotional regulation, which posits that antecedent-focused strategies are more effective in reducing emotional distress.

The positive relationship between expressive suppression and perceived stress further reinforces the maladaptive nature of response-focused emotional regulation strategies. Suppression may temporarily conceal emotional responses but often leads to increased physiological arousal and psychological strain, particularly in high-pressure academic environments.

The significant predictive role of coping strategies highlights the importance of behavioral and cognitive responses in stress management. Adaptive coping strategies enable individuals to directly address stressors or regulate emotional responses constructively, whereas maladaptive coping strategies may perpetuate stress through avoidance and disengagement.

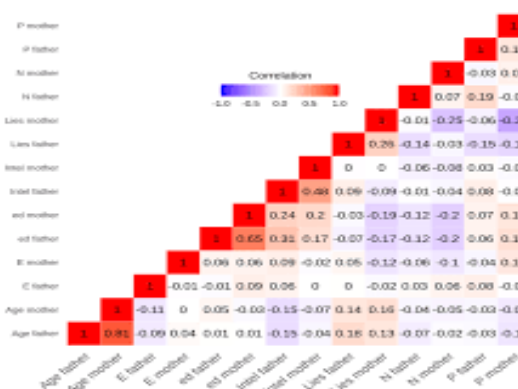
Taken together, the findings underscore the **interactive and cumulative influence** of emotional regulation and coping strategies on perceived stress, offering a nuanced understanding of stress processes among postgraduate students.



Implications of the Study

Clinical Implications

The results suggest that psychological interventions aimed at enhancing cognitive reappraisal and reducing reliance on expressive suppression can significantly lower stress levels. Counseling programs may incorporate cognitive-behavioral and emotion-focused techniques to improve emotional awareness and regulation skills.



Educational Implications

Universities can design and implement structured stress-management modules, mindfulness-based interventions, and emotional intelligence training as part of postgraduate curricula. Faculty mentorship programs may also help students develop healthier coping patterns.

Policy Implications

At an institutional level, policymakers should prioritize student mental health by establishing comprehensive support systems, including accessible counseling services, preventive workshops, and stress-screening initiatives. Policies promoting academic flexibility and workload management may further reduce stress.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. The reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response bias. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling and a postgraduate-only sample limits the generalizability of the findings to other student populations.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may employ longitudinal designs to examine changes in emotional regulation, coping strategies, and stress over time. Experimental studies testing the effectiveness of emotion regulation and coping interventions would further strengthen causal understanding. Researchers may also explore cultural, gender, and disciplinary differences in stress responses to enhance contextual relevance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that emotional regulation and coping strategies are critical determinants of perceived stress among postgraduate students. Adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and constructive coping serve as protective factors, whereas expressive suppression and maladaptive coping significantly elevate stress levels. By strengthening adaptive emotional and coping skills, academic institutions can promote psychological well-being, resilience, and academic success among postgraduate students.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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