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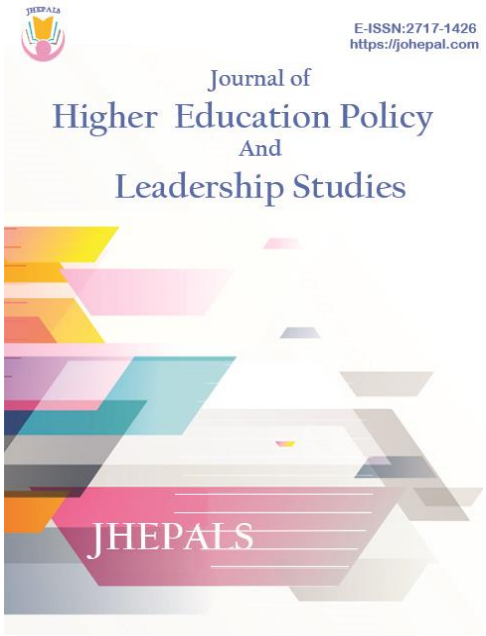

Understanding Shifts in Higher Education Professional Development: Evidence from Kazakhstani Universities' Pandemic Experience

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education in Kazakhstan, forcing rapid transitions to emergency remote teaching. This paper explores how this disruption influenced professional development (PD) practices and perceptions among university educators. Through qualitative interviews with ten university teachers in Almaty conducted between December 2022 and August 2023, the study employed thematic analysis to investigate how the emergency remote teaching period influenced educators' engagement with and views on PD. The analysis reveals three key themes: (1) the initial overemphasis on technology that overshadowed pedagogical support, leading to professional vulnerability and eventual strategic adaptation; (2) the transition from overwhelming online PD opportunities to intentional integration of blended learning modalities; and (3) the evolution from peer-based support networks to seeking expert-led professional development. These findings contribute to understanding how crisis periods impact professional development systems in higher education, while highlighting the need for institutions to develop more resilient and adaptive PD frameworks. The study suggests practical implications for universities, including the importance of balancing technological and pedagogical expertise, providing structured expert guidance, and maintaining flexible support structures that can adapt to both stable and disruptive periods.

Keywords: Professional Development; Higher Education, COVID-19; Kazakhstan; Emergency Remote Teaching; Teacher Vulnerability; Blended Learning

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted education systems worldwide, compelling a rapid transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote teaching modalities. This abrupt change challenged educators and institutions alike as they navigated uncharted territories to maintain educational continuity. In response to this unprecedented situation, many institutions adopted Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), defined as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternative mode due to crisis circumstances where traditional in-person education is not feasible (Hodges et al., 2020). Unlike planned online education, which involves deliberate course design tailored for virtual environments, ERT is characterized by rapid implementation and a lack of comprehensive planning (Nafissi & Saeedi, 2023).

The implementation of ERT posed significant challenges for educators, including inadequate infrastructure, limited technical knowledge, and insufficient training, which hindered effective teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, the lack of personal interaction and feedback—critical components of effective education—often resulted in diminished student engagement (Šinko et al., 2024). This urgent emphasis on technological solutions appeared to overshadow essential pedagogical considerations. The focus on mastering digital platforms sometimes came at the expense of pedagogical integrity and inclusivity (Crawford et al., 2020). Consequently, educators struggled to adapt their teaching methods effectively to the online environment, which may have impacted teaching effectiveness and educator well-being.

As a result, many educators experienced professional vulnerability, feeling inadequate and questioning their professional identity due to unprecedented challenges in their work environment. The sudden need to rapidly acquire new technological skills without adequate support contributed to feelings of stress and diminished self-efficacy (Bacova & Turner, 2023; Delgado-Gallegos et al., 2021). Such experiences might have long-term implications for educators' professional growth. Despite these difficulties, the pandemic also accelerated the integration of technology in higher education. Educators began to recognize technology as an essential competence rather than an optional enhancement (Chukwuere & Handoko, 2024). The crisis necessitated the adoption of digital tools and innovative teaching methods, which could have enduring effects on educational practices.

Moreover, the distinction between online and offline education has blurred, with hybrid models integrating both digital and in-person components becoming more prevalent (Pandya et al., 2022; Ulla & Perales, 2022). Such integration of modalities has enabled educators to develop more flexible and adaptable teaching approaches, better serving diverse student needs.

Professional development practices evolved during this period as well. Educators were compelled to reorganize their teaching strategies, often relying on peer networks and collaboration to enhance their digital competencies and pedagogical knowledge due to insufficient institutional guidance (Armellini & Rodriguez, 2022). This period underscored the importance of teacher agency and networked learning, as educators took responsibility for their own professional development to meet the demands of online education. The necessity for teachers to develop twenty-first-century skills—such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and ICT literacy—became evident to effectively engage students in a digital

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learning environment (Yue et al., 2023). Additionally, the transition to online teaching revealed the need for a caring approach, prioritizing student well-being and engagement over traditional task-driven methods, which proved beneficial in maintaining educational quality and student achievement (Tadi et al., 2023). In STEM fields, the lack of preparedness led to increased instructor anxiety and decreased student engagement, prompting educators to independently seek training in distance education and inclusive teaching practices (Walsh et al., 2022). These experiences emphasized the critical need for sustained PD opportunities, particularly in digital pedagogy, to better prepare educators for future challenges and ensure the continuity of quality education. Overall, the pandemic catalyzed a reevaluation of PD strategies, bringing to light the importance of adaptability, collaboration, and a focus on student-centered learning in the evolving educational landscape.

While research has documented broad shifts in professional development during the pandemic, there is need for more research into how ERT experiences, in particular, influenced university educators' perceptions and practices of professional development. Particularly, there remains a limited understanding of how crisis situations impact and transform formal and informal support networks. This study addresses these gaps by examining university educators' experiences in Kazakhstan's higher education context.

This qualitative study explores how teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped university educators' perceptions and practices of professional development in Kazakhstan. By conducting semi-structured interviews with educators across multiple universities, the research aims to provide insights into the long-term implications of ERT on professional growth and support networks. Understanding university teachers' perceptions and views about professional development is important as they directly shape educational experiences and impact student learning outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2024). Research indicates that teachers who engage effectively with professional development demonstrate stronger pedagogical skills and theory-practice relationships, leading to enhanced teaching quality and student achievement (Du et al., 2024; Suryandari et al., 2024). Additionally, examining teachers' perspectives helps identify barriers to effective professional development implementation, enabling more targeted approaches to improve teaching practices and educational quality across higher education institutions (Adams et al., 2023). The research question guiding this study is: How did the experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic reshape university educators' perceptions and practices of professional development?

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to explore how university educators in Almaty, Kazakhstan, perceived and practiced professional development during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of university teachers across different institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Eighteen educators were initially contacted via email and professional networks. The selection criteria included

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university teachers who had been actively teaching during the pandemic, were involved in the design and execution of formal and informal PD activities at their institutions during and after the pandemic and were willing to share their experiences regarding professional development.

Out of the 18 educators contacted, 10 agreed to participate in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were offered. I ensured that participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, following ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used (Participants A-J), and any identifying information about the individuals or their institutions was omitted.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2022 and August 2023. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring topics in depth while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews (Kallio et al., 2016). An interview guide was developed based on the research question and relevant literature, covering themes such as experiences with professional development during the pandemic, technological adaptation, and changes in support networks.

Interviews were conducted in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to over an hour, providing ample time for participants to express their thoughts and experiences thoroughly. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission to ensure accurate data capture for analysis.

The use of expert interviews was particularly suitable for this study as it focused on participants with specific knowledge and experience in university teaching during the pandemic (Bogner et al., 2009). This approach facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data that could illuminate the nuanced ways in which PD practices evolved.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its suitability in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data, allowing for a detailed examination of participants' perspectives. Following open coding, I searched for patterns and relationships among the codes to develop initial themes. The themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research question. This process involved comparing and contrasting participants' experiences to identify commonalities and differences in how they viewed professional development across the two time periods. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, I employed strategies such as reflexivity, keeping a research journal to reflect on potential biases and assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). The final themes were defined and named to encapsulate the essence of the participants' experiences. The thematic analysis yielded four

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main themes, which are presented in the Findings section, supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews.

Findings

Semi-structured interviews with ten educators from five universities in Almaty revealed changes in how Kazakhstani university teachers perceived and practiced professional development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the interview data yielded three distinct themes. Teachers initially struggled with their institutions' emphasis on technology at the expense of pedagogical support, which created feelings of professional vulnerability. As the pandemic progressed, they moved from being overwhelmed by numerous online PD opportunities to strategically combining different learning modalities. Their support networks also transformed, shifting from close colleague circles toward expert-led professional development that could meet their increased expectations for professional learning.

Each thematic section presents evidence from participant interviews to illustrate these evolving experiences and perspectives. The quoted material appears in English, translated by the researcher from the original Russian and Kazakh interviews. Care has been taken to preserve the participants' intended meanings during translation while maintaining their anonymity through the use of alphanumeric identifiers in both narrative references and parenthetical citations.

Technological Overemphasis and Neglected Pedagogy Fueling Professional Vulnerability

Universities prioritized technological solutions over pedagogical support when pandemic conditions forced a rapid move to online teaching. Across interviews, educators consistently described an institutional focus on mastering digital platforms while teaching effectiveness was overlooked. As one experienced teacher noted, "During the transition to online teaching, all our training sessions were about how to use Zoom or upload materials to the LMS. There was hardly any discussion about actually teaching effectively online" (Participant A). This emphasis on technical training, particularly with platforms like Zoom, Moodle, and various learning management systems, emerged as a dominant pattern in educators' experiences.

The data revealed widespread frustration with how institutions approached pedagogical support during this transition. Core teaching elements—fostering student engagement, facilitating interactive learning, and adapting teaching methodologies—received minimal attention in PD initiatives. One participant observed, "We were left to figure out how to adjust teaching methods on our own. There was no guidance on making online classes interactive or assessing students virtually" (Participant E). This institutional oversight created significant challenges for maintaining educational quality.

The convergence of technological demands and inadequate pedagogical support fostered what many participants described as profound professional vulnerability. Experienced educators, in particular, reported a striking diminishment of their professional identity. One veteran educator shared, "After 20 years of teaching, suddenly I felt like a beginner again. Struggling with technical issues in front of my students was embarrassing and shook my confidence" (Participant C). Technical difficulties proved especially

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challenging, with educators finding it "hard to maintain professional pride" when struggling with basic functions like microphone settings (Participant D).

During this initial transition, necessity rather than structured development drove technological adaptation. Participants indicated having to "scramble to figure out how to use video conferencing tools just to keep classes running" (Participant D), while the absence of formal support structures forced them into uncomfortable positions of self-reliance. As one educator explained, they "had to become [their] own technical support" (Participant B), revealing a fundamental transformation in PD approaches.

As the pandemic progressed, educators' relationship with technology evolved, though not uniformly. While some participants commented that they "got past the initial hurdles" and discovered how "digital tools could actually enhance teaching" (Participant K), others continued to struggle. The isolation inherent in remote teaching, as revealed by multiple participants, exacerbated these challenges. "Teaching from home was isolating," one educator reflected. "Without spontaneous interactions with colleagues, I felt like I was facing these challenges alone" (Participant I). This reduction in collegial support networks emerged as a critical factor in educators' ability to address these challenges collectively.

The impact of this period continues to influence current practice, with educators expressing markedly different experiences of professional growth. Some found unexpected value in this forced adaptation—"The crisis pushed me to learn more in a few months than I had in years," as Participant J remarked. Others, however, developed lasting apprehension, stating that "even now, I feel anxious when we have online meetings. It brings back all the stress from those early pandemic days" (Participant G).

In summary, the analysis revealed a consistent pattern where disproportionate emphasis on technological solutions marginalized essential pedagogical support, creating lasting professional vulnerability among educators. While some teachers eventually adapted to accelerated technological integration, the combined effect of reduced peer support, professional isolation, and pedagogical challenges fundamentally transformed their relationship with professional development. The trajectory from crisis response to strategic adaptation points to the necessity for balanced approaches to educational technology and pedagogical support in higher education.

From Overload to Integration: Tailoring Professional Development Through Blended Modalities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators experienced what participants consistently characterized as an overwhelming proliferation of PD opportunities. The sudden shift to remote teaching led to what one educator described as being "flooded with invitations to online workshops and seminars" (Participant E), particularly through free or subsidized offerings. This abundance, while potentially valuable, emerged in the data as a significant barrier to effective engagement with professional development.

The data revealed contrasting responses to this surge in opportunities. While some educators welcomed the chance to "explore subjects I'd been curious about but never had time for before" (Participant B), others reported significant challenges with decision-making. The experience of feeling "so overwhelmed that I didn't know where to start" (Participant C) emerged as a recurring theme, exemplifying the paradoxical nature of abundant choice in professional development.

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Shifts in HE Professional Development

As educators gained experience in this new landscape, their approaches to professional development evolved significantly. The data indicated a clear progression from initial overwhelm toward more strategic engagement. Traditional boundaries between delivery modes began to dissolve, with participants reporting benefits from combining different formats. The integration of "online courses with occasional in-person workshops," as one educator noted, provided what they experienced as "the best of both worlds" (Participant H), suggesting an emerging preference for blended approaches.

The development of blended approaches fostered what emerged in the data as increased professional agency. Educators described creating what one participant termed "my own PD plan by mixing different formats," which made professional learning "more relevant and manageable" (Participant A). The growing emphasis on personalization signaled a fundamental transformation in how educators conceptualized and engaged with PD opportunities.

The data suggested that this integration of formats yielded benefits beyond individual learning. PD activities became mechanisms for expanding professional networks beyond traditional geographic constraints. The opportunity for "engaging in online PD" created connections "with educators from around the world," leading to what participants described as broadened perspectives and enriched teaching practices (Participant J). This expansion of professional communities emerged as a significant, though unanticipated, outcome of the transition to blended modalities.

Perhaps most significantly, the initial abundance of choices ultimately fostered more discriminating approaches to professional development. Participants' experiences navigating multiple options led to more refined selection criteria for professional learning. The process of "navigating through so many options" led educators to "identify what truly benefits my teaching," resulting in what one participant characterized as becoming "more intentional about the PD I engage with" (Participant K). This heightened intentionality in approaching professional development emerged as a lasting change in educators' professional growth strategies.

In conclusion, analysis of the interview data revealed a clear trajectory from initial overload to strategic integration in PD practices. Educators progressed from feeling overwhelmed by abundant opportunities to crafting personalized learning pathways that thoughtfully blended online and face-to-face modalities. This evolution toward more intentional and integrated approaches to professional development notably influenced both individual learning strategies and broader professional networks, setting the stage for more sophisticated expectations of expert-led guidance.

Evolving Support Networks and Professional Development Expectations

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators found themselves abruptly isolated, teaching from their homes and grappling with the uncertainty of how long online instruction would persist. The data revealed that traditional avenues for professional interaction were disrupted, leading educators to depend heavily on established support networks. As one participant explained, "In those early days, I leaned on my closest peers more than ever before; they were my lifeline" (Participant F). This reliance on familiar connections emerged as a crucial source of both emotional and professional support during the initial period of uncertainty.

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The significance of pre-established networks intensified with the isolation inherent in remote teaching. The loss of workplace interactions, particularly what one educator described as the inability to "pop into a colleague's office for a quick chat" (Participant B), contributed to feelings of disconnection. Participants consistently reported turning to small, trusted circles for guidance and camaraderie, drawing attention to the critical role of peer support in maintaining professional community during this period.

However, the data indicated an evolution in these support patterns as the pandemic continued. What began as essential peer-to-peer support gradually transformed into what participants characterized as a source of frustration. While educators "appreciated my colleagues' support," they found themselves "stuck in a loop without new solutions" (Participant H), suggesting the limitations of relying solely on immediate peer networks for professional growth.

Analysis of current perspectives revealed an emerging preference for expert-led professional development. Participants increasingly reported seeking what one educator termed "innovative strategies" from subject matter experts (Participant C). The movement toward greater expertise coincided with broader changes in PD expectations, as educators became more selective in their approaches to learning opportunities. One participant noted this evolution, noting a specific search for "programs that are led by recognized experts and offer practical, evidence-based strategies" (Participant A).

The transition from peer reliance to expert-led development emerged as a significant pattern in the data. While acknowledging that "informal networks were crucial" during lockdown, educators reported feeling "the need to expand my horizons and learn from leaders in the field" (Participant J). This pattern suggested a natural progression from crisis-driven peer support to more structured professional growth opportunities.

The data revealed increasing discernment in educators' approach to professional development quality and credibility. The experience of what one participant described as "constantly discussing our shared struggles without actionable solutions" (Participant D) led to a desire for more structured learning experiences. This fatigue with peer-to-peer sharing coincided with growing expectations for professional development that could provide concrete tools and knowledge.

Notably, this evolution did not represent a complete abandonment of peer networks but rather a refinement in how educators approached professional collaboration. As one participant indicated, the preference changed toward "structured collaboration facilitated by someone with specialized expertise" (Participant E), suggesting a desire to combine the benefits of peer engagement with expert guidance.

The analysis revealed a clear trajectory in educators' support networks and PD expectations throughout and after the pandemic period. The initial reliance on close colleagues for immediate support evolved into a more strategic pursuit of professional growth, characterized by increased selectivity and a preference for expert-led learning opportunities. This transformation highlighted the dynamic nature of PD needs and the importance of balanced approaches that incorporate both peer support and specialized expertise in the evolving educational landscape.

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Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals three significant transformations in professional development among Kazakhstani university educators during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. First, educators experienced professional vulnerability due to technological overemphasis and neglected pedagogy, eventually developing more strategic approaches to technology integration. Second, they progressed from feeling overwhelmed by abundant PD opportunities to strategically integrating blended learning modalities. Third, their support networks evolved from peer-based systems to more expert-led professional development, reflecting heightened expectations for professional learning.

These findings make important contributions to understanding professional development in higher education during crisis periods. By illuminating how educators navigate technological, pedagogical, and professional challenges while maintaining their teaching responsibilities, this study extends our knowledge of professional resilience and adaptation in higher education. The findings can be particularly understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that supportive environments are crucial for sustained, engaged learning (Smith & Wyness, 2024). The evolution from professional vulnerability to strategic adaptation demonstrates how educators' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and connectedness were initially challenged but gradually met through more tailored approaches to professional development.

This transformation can also be viewed through Archer's Social Realist Theory (Archer, 2000), which explains how structure, culture, and agency interact in educational settings . Our findings reveal how institutional structures initially prioritized technical solutions, while cultural factors influenced support networks, and teacher agency emerged through strategic adaptation to PD opportunities. The trajectory of professional vulnerability and technology integration aligns with recent scholarship on teacher identity during crisis periods (Bacova & Turner, 2023; LaTronica-Herb & Karalis Noel, 2023), extending this work by demonstrating how vulnerability stems from the intersection of technical demands with diminished pedagogical support and professional isolation. Furthermore, the findings about educators' transition to strategic integration of blended modalities reflect broader trends in hybrid learning spaces (Stankovska et al., 2022), while uniquely underscoring how crisis-driven abundance can foster more discriminating approaches to professional learning. The evolution of support networks builds on research about teacher autonomy and collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2017), revealing how crisis situations catalyze changes in professional learning preferences.

These findings have significant implications for institutional practice. Universities should develop integrated support systems that acknowledge both technical and human dimensions of professional growth (Rapanta et al., 2021). Drawing from our findings and recent research (Smith & Wyness, 2024), several specific design principles emerge as crucial for effective professional development: flexible but structured formats, smaller groupings for peer review, and specialized training for feedback roles. This includes providing multimodal PD opportunities while facilitating both peer support networks and expert-led learning. Institutions should consider removing the pressure of mandatory attendance while increasing choice in PD options, potentially including teacher-created initiatives. As Darling-

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Hammond (2017) suggests, institutions should legitimize both structured and informal learning interactions, creating environments that support diverse professional growth pathways.

Building on these implications, future research could explore several promising directions. Longitudinal studies might examine the sustainability of these transformations in PD practices, particularly investigating how different experience levels influence PD preferences and outcomes. Comparative research across different cultural and institutional contexts could illuminate how professional development systems might better prepare for educational disruptions. Additionally, investigating the relationship between evolved PD approaches and student learning outcomes could provide valuable insights for educational effectiveness.

For the field of higher education professional development, these findings suggest a necessary progression toward more resilient and adaptive systems (Cargile & Gollobin, 2024). As universities continue to face technological and pedagogical challenges, professional development frameworks must evolve to support educators through both stable and disruptive periods. The pandemic experience demonstrates that effective professional development requires careful attention to educators' identity and agency, balanced integration of technology and pedagogy, and flexible support structures that can adapt to changing circumstances. Professional development frameworks should balance institutional priorities with teacher agency, creating environments that empower educators while meeting organizational needs - a balance that becomes increasingly important as higher education continues to navigate periods of change and disruption.

Several limitations warrant consideration in interpreting these findings. The focus on 10 educators in Almaty may limit generalizability to other contexts. The reliance on retrospective interviews might have introduced recall bias, potentially affecting participants' recollections of their early pandemic experiences. Additionally, the study's timing during the transition period might not fully capture long-term changes in professional development practices.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There is no conflict of interest to be cited here.

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Human Participants

All participants provided informed consent and participated voluntarily without incentives. The study followed ethical guidelines for human subjects research, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (Participants A-J). All identifying information was removed to protect participants' privacy. The study posed no risks to participants.

Originality Note

I hereby confirm that this manuscript is my original work, presenting novel research conducted by the author. All information, ideas, and quotations from other sources used in this study have been properly cited and credited to their original authors.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author stated that an AI-powered digital writing assistant, Grammarly, was used in this research solely for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. The author also confirmed that no other parts of the research were written using these technologies. Additionally, a native English speaker was invited to proofread the text prior to its online publication.

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