

Internet infidelity among Iranian users: The role of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors

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Article Info	Abstract
Original article	Background: The emergence of virtual social networks has facilitated a new form of marital infidelity known as internet infidelity.
Main Object: Psychology, Counseling	Aims: This study investigated the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between self-compassion, relationship maintenance behaviors, and attitudes toward internet infidelity.
Received: 09 June 2025	Methodology: A cross-sectional study using SEM was conducted among 481 Iranian married users. The data collection was performed using Internet Infidelity, Relationship Maintenance Strategies, Self-Compassion, and Self-Esteem Questionnaires. SEM was used to examine hypothesized relationships, and the bootstrap in Preacher and Hayes' Macro program was employed for testing mediation.
Revised: 19 September 2025	Findings: SEM analysis revealed that self-compassion and relationship maintenance behaviors had a direct effect on both self-esteem and attitudes toward internet infidelity ($P < 0.0001$). However, the hypothesized mediating role of self-esteem was not supported. These findings underscore the significant influence of self-compassion and relationship maintenance behaviors in predicting attitudes toward internet infidelity.
Accepted: 19 September 2025	Conclusion: Counseling interventions aimed at fostering self-compassion and reinforcing relationship maintenance skills may help reduce the risk of internet infidelity.
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Keywords: attitude to internet infidelity, Iranian users, relationship maintenance behaviors, self-compassion, self-esteem, social networks.	

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1. Introduction

Rapid technological advancement has established high-speed internet infrastructure globally. The Coronavirus pandemic further accelerated internet adoption (Király et al., 2020). Currently, approximately 67% of the world's population (over five billion people) and 77% of the Middle Eastern population (over 200 million people) use the internet (Internet World Stats, 2022). Virtual social networks demand considerable time and energy, which can potentially weaken familial bonds and cohesion (Sultana, 2017). Platforms like Twitter, with over 500 million users (Clayton, 2014), and Facebook, with over 1.2 billion active users (Anderson et al., 2012), not only impact users' mental health but also affect married individuals, leading to a distinct form of marital betrayal termed internet infidelity (Mao & Raguram, 2009).

Iran presents a particularly relevant context for this phenomenon. Its relatively young population, high urbanization, and restrictions on in-person social interaction have driven a sharp increase in social media use. Messaging platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp are especially popular in Iran due to their ease of access, end-to-end encryption, and cultural preferences for discreet online communication. Telegram's emphasis on private channels and chats, more so than Instagram or Facebook, makes it a potential medium for private interactions that could lead to internet infidelity.

This study is both important and timely, as internet infidelity poses a unique challenge to Iranian marital values, which are deeply influenced by Islamic norms emphasizing loyalty, family cohesion, and traditional roles. While infidelity has been studied in Western contexts, a significant gap exists in data from countries like Iran, where cultural and religious norms profoundly shape social behavior. Our research addresses this gap by examining psychological predictors of attitudes toward internet infidelity among married Iranians.

2. Background

2.1. Internet infidelity

Infidelity is typically defined as a secret emotional or sexual relationship with someone other than one's spouse, violating the commitment central to marriage and potentially causing significant harm (Daubert, 2013). Research categorizes infidelity into several types (Mao & Raguram, 2009):

- **Emotional infidelity.** Investing romantic love, time, and attention in someone other than one's spouse.
- **Sexual infidelity.** Engaging in sexual activity with someone other than one's spouse.
- **Combined infidelity.** A relationship involving both emotional and sexual components with someone other than one's spouse.
- **Internet infidelity.** Engaging in online chats with a non-spouse

of the opposite sex that contains sexual, emotional, or combined content.

A consensus on the definition of internet infidelity remains elusive, even among therapists specializing in marital issues (Goldberg et al., 2008; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Some researchers define it as using the internet to invest emotional and sexual energy into a relationship outside of the primary partnership (Roman, 2020). Daubert (2013) describes it as any secret romantic or sexual relationship between individuals other than their spouses, conducted through electronic means.

Three standard features often characterize internet infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008):

- **Secrecy.** The ability to hide online communications easily.
- **Sexual content.** The ease of sharing sexual fantasies and engaging in seduction online.
- **Time investment.** The significant time spent on online communication devices can itself be destructive to a marriage, as time spent with an external party is a key factor in defining infidelity.

This phenomenon threatens family cohesion (Carter, 2019; Isanejad & Bagheri, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017) and negatively impacts culture and society (Roman, 2020). Both interpersonal and intrapersonal factors influence couples' attitudes toward marital infidelity (Isma & Turnip, 2019). This study examines relationship maintenance behaviors, self-compassion, and self-esteem as key factors affecting internet infidelity.

2.2. Internet Infidelity and Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

Relationship maintenance behaviors are critical interpersonal factors influencing attitudes toward infidelity. These behaviors, as defined by Stafford et al. (2000), include:

- **Positivity.** Maintaining a positive, supportive, and hopeful demeanor.
- **Openness.** Discussing the relationship and expressing feelings and desires.
- **Assurance.** Demonstrating commitment, acceptance, and mutual love.
- **Social networks.** Maintaining relationships with friends and family.
- **Sharing tasks.** Dividing household responsibilities fairly.
- **Conflict management.** Resolving disputes constructively.
- **Advice.** Sharing opinions and seeking mutual counsel to strengthen the relationship.

According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959) interdependence theory, individuals derive satisfaction from relationships that exceed their expectations. This theory remains relevant for understanding how online alternatives affect perceptions of relational satisfaction and loyalty in the digital age. Relationship maintenance behaviors serve as indicators of a partner's engagement, with higher levels correlating with greater relationship satisfaction (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. Relationship maintenance behaviors are related to attitudes toward internet infidelity.

2.3. Internet infidelity and Self-compassion

Self-compassion is an intrapersonal variable significantly affecting marital satisfaction (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, it emphasizes self-kindness (Neff et al., 2007) and is considered a prerequisite for compassion toward others (Stephenson et al., 2018). It is an interpersonal characteristic that enables individuals to support themselves and others during crises (Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

Neff (2003) identifies three core components:

- **Self-kindness vs. Self-judgment.** Treating oneself with support and understanding rather than harsh criticism.
- **Common humanity vs. Isolation.** Recognizing that imperfection and suffering are part of the shared human experience, not personal failings.
- **Mindfulness vs. Over-identification.** Maintaining a balanced awareness of one's present experience without suppressing or ruminating on it.

Self-compassion involves accepting all aspects of one, acknowledging that failure is universal, and avoiding the suppression of negative emotions (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003; 2011). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2. Self-compassion is related to attitudes toward internet infidelity.

2.4. The mediating role of self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of being loved and capable (Neff, 2011). It encompasses perceptions of physical appearance, personal achievements, values, life success, and social feedback (VandenBos, 2007). Self-esteem and marital satisfaction are interrelated (Mund et al., 2015); it is a crucial resource for navigating stress and transitions, enhancing quality of life during adversity. Couples with higher self-esteem demonstrate greater resilience, trust, and mutual understanding (Türkben Polat & Kaplan Serin, 2021). Thus, self-esteem likely influences attitudes toward internet infidelity.

Research shows a significant correlation between self-compassion and self-esteem 0.57–0.59 (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003). This is

logical, as both reflect a positive self-attitude. Individuals low in self-compassion often diminishes their self-worth through self-criticism, while those high in self-compassion tend to have higher self-worth (Neff, 2011). Furthermore, relationship satisfaction, rather than mere relationship status, is linked to self-esteem (Harris & Orth, 2020). Hence, we hypothesize:

H3. Self-esteem is related to attitudes toward internet infidelity.

H4. Relationship maintenance behaviors are related to self-esteem.

H5. Self-compassion is related to self-esteem.

Self-compassion may enhance marital relationships by boosting self-esteem and satisfaction (Baker & McNulty, 2011). Similarly, relationship maintenance behaviors can influence attitudes toward infidelity by increasing marital satisfaction and self-esteem (Leary, 2002). Therefore, we expect self-esteem to mediate the relationships between self-compassion, relationship maintenance behaviors, and attitudes toward internet infidelity:

H6. Self-esteem mediates the relationship between relationship maintenance behaviors and attitudes toward internet infidelity.

H7. Self-esteem mediates the relationship between self-compassion and attitudes toward internet infidelity.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Procedure

This descriptive cross-sectional study utilized structural equation modeling (SEM). The population consisted of married Iranian users of online chat rooms (e.g., Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, and other Persian-language platforms) between March and August 2019. Although a sample size of 200 is often considered minimal for SEM (Kline, 2011), we recruited 481 married Iranian users via available sampling. Participants were recruited through public calls on social media platforms and chat rooms. Digital informed consent was obtained, emphasizing the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. Participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Of the 481 initial respondents, 61 were excluded due to incomplete data or not meeting eligibility criteria (e.g., not being married). The final sample consisted of 408 participants. The gender imbalance (74.8% female) may reflect broader trends in social research participation or a differential willingness to discuss sensitive marital topics. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of [blinded for review]. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample members (n= 408)

Characteristics		N	%
Sex	Famle	305	74.8
	Male	103	25.2
Age (years)	20-24	65	16
	25-29	49	12
	30-34	109	26.7
	35-39	107	26.2
	≥40	60	14.7
Education	High school	24	5.9
	Diploma	109	26.7
	Bachelor	207	50.7
	Master and above	68	16.7
Length of marriage (years)	≤1	62	15.2
	2-5	76	18.6
	6-9	110	26.9
	≥10	160	39.2
Do you have a secret relationship with the opposite sex?	Yes	133	32.6
	No	275	67.4
Do you think your spouse has a secret relationship with the opposite sex?	Yes	66	16.2
	No	246	60.3
	Maybe	96	23.5
How many hours a day do you spend on social media on average?	< 2	116	28.4
	2-4	159	39
	5-7	98	24
	8-10	25	6.1
	>10	10	2.5
How many hours a day did your spouse spend on social media on average?	< 2	170	41.7
	2-4	134	32.8
	5-7	79	19.3
	8-10	15	3.7
	>10	10	2.5
Which social network are you most active in?	Telegram	214	52.4
	Facebook	15	3.7
	Instagram	56	13.7
	Watsapp	70	17
	Other chat rooms	53	13

The participants were from all provinces of Iran. Of the total participants, there were 305 (74.8%) female and 103 (25.2%) were male. Twenty-two participants (5.9%) were high school students, 109 (26.75%) had a diploma degree, 207 (50.7%) were undergraduates and 68 (16.7%) were postgraduates and held a PhD. Notably, the lowest percentage of the participants belonged to 16-18-year-old people at 1%, and the highest percentage belonged to people over 40 years old at 15%. As much as 52.4% of participants were active in Telegram, 3.7% active in Facebook, 13.7% active in Instagram, 17% active in WhatsApp, and 13% active in other Persian-language chat rooms.

3.2. Measures

The Internet Infidelity Questionnaire (IIQ). Developed by Docan-Morgan and Docan (2007), this 6-point Likert scale (1= not infidelity,

6= highest infidelity) measures attitudes toward a partner's secret online behaviors. Higher scores indicate a stricter, more negative attitude toward infidelity. Its validity and reliability are well-established (Docan-Morgan & Docan, 2007; Suliakaite, 2009), including in Iranian populations (Isanejad & Bagheri, 2018). In this study, Cronbach's α was 0.91. Participants evaluated hypothetical scenarios of their spouse engaging in secretive online behaviors (e.g., "chatting late at night with someone of the opposite sex").

Relationship maintenance strategies questionnaire. Originally a 29-item scale by Stafford and Canary (1991), it was later expanded to 31 items by Canary et al. (2002) to include conflict management and advice. It measures seven behaviors on a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Higher scores reflect more frequent use of maintenance behaviors. Subscale reliabilities range from 0.70 to 0.86 (Stafford & Canary, 1991), and its validity is well-documented (Gettings & Wilson, 2014; Mikkelsen et al., 2011; Stafford, 2011). In Iran, Ghezelsefloo et al. (2018) reported a Cronbach's α of 0.93. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.95.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). Developed by Neff (2003), this scale measures self-compassion and its six subscales on a 5-point Likert scale (0= almost never, 4= almost always). The total scale reliability is $\alpha = 0.92$, with subscales ranging from 0.75 to 0.81; test-retest reliability is 0.93. Momeni et al. (2014) validated the Farsi version, confirming its factor structure and reporting good convergent and divergent validity. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.81.

Self-esteem questionnaire (Rosenberg scale). This scale was developed by Rosenberg (1965). This widely used scale has a well-established unifactorial structure explaining 42% of variance (Greenberger et al., 2003). Its reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$) and validity are confirmed through correlations with constructs like depression and anxiety (Pullmann & Allik, 2000). Mohammadi (2005) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78 for the Iranian version.

3.3. Data analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS 22 with maximum likelihood estimation to test the hypothesized direct and indirect effects. Model fit was assessed using χ^2 , RMSEA, CFI, and GFI. Indirect effects for mediation (H6, H7) were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals in Preacher and Hayes (2008) Macro program.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations for all variables. The mean scores were: self-compassion (82.78 ± 12.10), relationship maintenance behaviors (171.35 ± 35.07),

self-esteem (3.01 ± 4.74), and attitude toward internet infidelity (108.74 ± 67.13). Relationship maintenance behaviors were positively correlated with self-esteem and attitudes toward infidelity. Self-compassion was negatively correlated with self-esteem but positively correlated with attitudes toward infidelity. No significant correlation was found between self-esteem and attitudes toward infidelity.

4.2. Structural model

The initial hypothesized model showed poor fit: $\chi^2 = 216.21$, $P < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.16, CFI = 0.77, NFI = 0.76, AGFI = 0.78. After post-hoc modifications, including removing the non-significant path from self-esteem to attitude toward infidelity and correlating errors between the self-kindness and mindfulness constructs (These modifications were theoretically justified, as prior research suggests that correlated errors between conceptually related constructs such as self-kindness and mindfulness are common in psychological SEM models. Thus, while data-driven, the adjustments align with theory rather than mere statistical convenience), the final model demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2 = 88.33$, $P < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.90, AGFI = 0.90 (Table 3).

The final model (Figure 1) confirmed several direct effects:

- Relationship maintenance behaviors ($\beta = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$) and self-compassion ($\beta = 0.11$, $P < 0.001$) directly influenced attitudes toward internet infidelity (supporting H1 and H2).
- Relationship maintenance behaviors ($\beta = 0.23$, $P < 0.001$) and self-compassion ($\beta = 0.49$, $P < 0.001$) directly influenced self-esteem (supporting H4 and H5).
- Self-esteem did not have a direct effect on attitudes toward internet infidelity ($\beta = 0.05$, $P = 0.387$) (H3 not supported).

Bootstrapping analysis via Preacher and Hayes' Macro program did not confirm the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationships between self-compassion ($\beta = -0.05$, $P < 0.01$) and relationship maintenance behaviors ($\beta = -0.04$, $P < 0.08$) with attitudes toward internet infidelity (H6 and H7 not supported).

5. Discussion

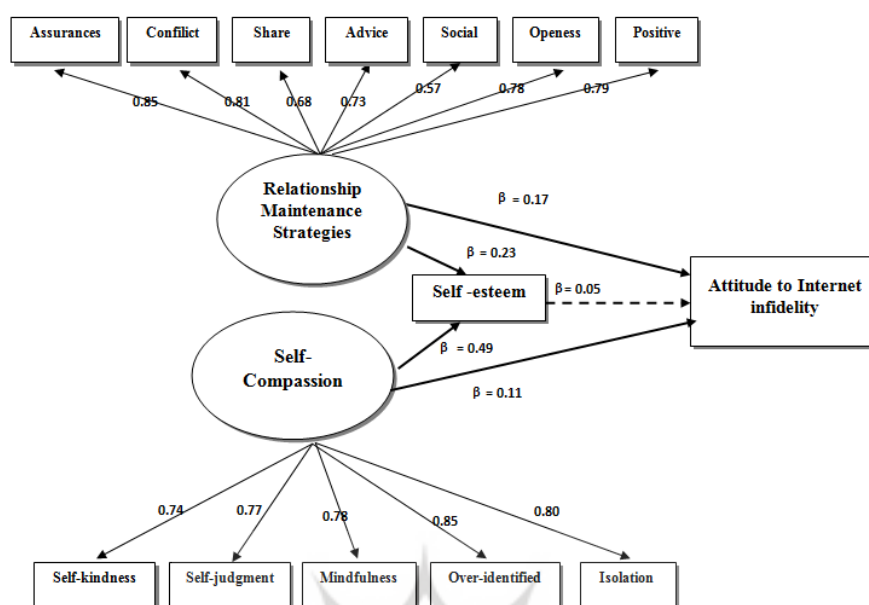
This study investigated a model of direct and indirect effects of self-compassion, self-esteem, and relationship maintenance behaviors on attitudes toward internet infidelity. The results indicate that higher self-compassion is associated with stricter (more negative) attitudes toward internet infidelity, aligning with Twenge and Campbell (2003), who found that self-compassionate individuals are more likely to engage in reconciliatory behavior. Self-compassion fosters a balanced, non-judgmental view of oneself and one's relationship, reducing frustration and the perceived need for seeking validation online, thus leading to a more pessimistic view of internet infidelity.

Table 2. Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of studied variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Self-compassion	-																
2. Self-kindness	.46**	-															
3. Self-judgment	.67**	-.13**	-														
4. Common humanity	.54**	.47**	.05	-													
5. Isolation	.63**	-.16**	.61	.002	-												
6. Mindfulness	.46**	.54**	-.03	.46**	-.09	-											
7. Over-identification	.62**	-.15**	.66**	-.009	.68**	-.19**	-										
8. Relationships behaviors	-.02	.19**	-.07	.12**	-.25**	.22**	-.23**	-									
9. Assurances	-.06	.14**	-.10**	.11**	-.25**	.17**	-.24**	.91**	-								
10. Openness	-.06	.12*	-.06	.07	-.24**	.13*	-.20**	.86**	.76**	-							
11. Conflict	.01	.18**	-.04	.11*	-.21**	.24**	-.19**	.84**	.71**	.63**	-						
12. Share	.04	.21**	-.06	.11*	-.15**	.25**	-.18**	.71**	.51*	.45**	.61**	-					
13. Positive	.06	.20**	-.04	.13**	-.14**	.23**	-.15**	.77**	.65**	.56**	.67**	.60	-				
14. Advice	.08	.14**	.03	.10*	-.11*	.19**	-.06	.72**	.58**	.59**	.57**	.50**	.59**	-			
15. Social	.001	.07	-.04	.08	-.11*	.16**	-.13**	.59**	.43**	.39**	.42**	.53**	.49**	.49**	-		
16. Internet infidelity	.10*	.05	.05	.08	.05	.04	.08	.14**	.16**	.13**	.08	.06	.12*	.11*	.07	-	
17. Self-esteem	-.24**	.19**	-.38**	.13*	-.45**	.24**	-.45**	.31**	.31**	.22**	.27**	.25**	.26**	.19**	.16**	.03	-
Mean	82.78	16.06	15.55	12.63	12.54	13.04	12.94	171.35	44.69	37.48	27.25	27.80	11.41	11.52	11.17	108.74	3.88
SD	12.10	4.13	3.89	3.03	3.61	3.09	3.68	35.07	12.03	10.01	6.29	5.77	2.89	2.72	3.14	67.13	4.74

Table 3. Hypothesized, modified and final SEM model based on fit indicators

Fit indicators	χ^2	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	IFI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Hypothesized model	216.21	12.01	0.89	0.78	0.77	0.77	0.76	0.164
Final model	88.33	4.90	0.95	0.90	0.92	0.92	0.90	0.098



Note: All values are standardized coefficients; the dotted line represents the excluded path ($P < 0.001$).

Figure 1. The results of the final SEM model

The study also confirmed the direct effect of relationship maintenance behaviors on stricter attitudes toward infidelity. These behaviors enhance marital commitment and satisfaction (Baker & McNulty, 2011), which are negatively associated with infidelity tendencies (Muusses et al., 2015; Shackelford et al., 2008). Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and equity theory (Dainton, 2000) suggest that satisfying, equitable relationships encourage the use of maintenance behaviors, which in turn reinforces satisfaction and commitment, thereby reducing the appeal of infidelity.

As hypothesized, self-compassion and relationship maintenance behaviors positively influenced self-esteem, consistent with Neff (2011). Self-compassion reduces self-criticism and builds resilience (Neff, 2003; Yarnell & Neff, 2013), thereby bolstering self-worth. Supportive relationship behaviors improve marital quality (Mund et al., 2015), which enhances self-esteem.

Contrary to hypotheses and some previous research (Błachnio et al., 2016; Shrout & Weigel, 2020), self-esteem did not mediate the relationships between the predictors and the outcome, nor did it have a direct effect. This non-significant result may be explained by cultural context. In Iran, strong religious and cultural norms condemning infidelity may be such a powerful influence that they override individual differences in self-esteem. Furthermore, the Rosenberg Scale, developed in a Western individualistic context, may not fully capture culturally nuanced aspects of self-worth in Iran's more

collectivistic society, potentially attenuating its measured effect. As, Cai et al. (2007) indicated that people in East Asian countries exhibit lower scores in self-reported global self-esteem measures when compared to their counterparts in Western countries. Sample heterogeneity and the cross-sectional design (precluding causal inference) are other possible limitations. Alternatively, the direction of causality might be reversed; experiencing betrayal can lower self-esteem (Jeuken, 2022).

Additional findings revealed that men reported using significantly more relationship maintenance behaviors than women ($t= 3.525$, $P= 0.0001$). These contrasts with mixed prior results, where some studies found men use more (Stafford & Canary, 1991) and others found women use more (Dindia & Canary, 1993; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). An explanation may be that while women are more aware of these behaviors, men might report enacting them more frequently (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). It is important to note that the measure assessed self-reported use of behaviors, not perception of a partner's use. No significant gender difference was found in attitudes toward internet infidelity ($t= 0.777$, $P= 0.438$), consistent with some studies (Negash et al., 2019; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013) though others report gender differences (Martins et al., 2016; Shimberg et al., 2016).

A key strength of this study is its large, nationwide sample. Limitations include the use of cross-sectional SEM, which cannot establish causality, and the potential for self-report bias.

6. Conclusion

Self-compassion and relationship maintenance behaviors directly influence self-esteem and predict stricter attitudes toward internet infidelity among married Iranian users. However, the mediating role of self-esteem was not confirmed. Given the harmful consequences of internet infidelity for families and society, interventions are needed. Educating parents on self-compassion could enhance their own and their children's emotional well-being, potentially reducing future tendencies toward infidelity. Workshops on relationship maintenance skills could strengthen marital bonds and self-esteem. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causality, use alternative measures of self-esteem and infidelity attitudes, focus on more homogenous groups, and test this model in other cultural contexts to understand the role of culture in shaping these dynamics.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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