

Article

## The Elderly's Self-Presentation on Social Media: An Examination of How it Influences Subjective Well-Being

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**Abstract:** The widespread adoption of social media has created new avenues for self-presentation. Advances in digital technology and the widespread adoption of smartphones have significantly increased the convenience of online social interaction. With the aging of China's population, an increasing number of the elderly are using social media platforms to enhance their social engagement and well-being. A widely accepted study by Korean scholars Kim and Lee on the relationship between online self-presentation and subjective well-being primarily examined the impact of positive and honest self-presentation, number of friends, and perceived social support on the subjective well-being of American college students. Based on the existing literature, this paper examines whether the original influencing factors have a positive impact on subjective well-being from different target groups and social media platforms. This study used this as a framework to examine whether these factors also apply to older users. Furthermore, positive self-presentation indirectly influenced well-being through perceived social support, with perceived social support serving as a mediator of this relationship. Honest self-presentation reflects authentic needs and promotes inner coherence, while a larger social network provides social capital and support, further enhancing well-being. These insights contribute to understanding how digital self-presentation strategies support healthy aging and offer practical implications for designing social media features tailored to the health needs of older users.

**Keywords:** Elderly; China; social media use; subjective well-being; rednote; digital aging

### Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has fundamentally transformed daily communication, offering new avenues for self-presentation, social engagement, and community participation (Valkenburg, 2022). Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok have attracted billions of users worldwide. These platforms serve not only as entertainment and information sources but also as spaces where individuals shape their identities, connect with others, and seek social support. The ubiquity and interactivity of social media make it a vital part of modern life, influencing psychological well-being across different populations (Isabela et al., 2024). In China, rapid demographic aging has heightened the importance of understanding social media's role among the elderly. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (Peng, 2023), as of February 2023, China had approximately 280 million people aged 60 and over, and approximately 210 million people aged 65 and over. As the elderly retire and social activities decline, social isolation and loneliness become common problems; social media offers a promising platform for addressing these issues.

Social media provides the elderly with opportunities to maintain existing relationships, establish new connections, and actively participate in digital communities. Its ease of use and real-time interactivity make it easy for older users to showcase themselves online and gain attention. According to authoritative Chinese data, nearly 300 million older adults actively use social media each month, spending over 120 hours online each month. This rapid growth makes understanding the impact of their online behaviors on their well-being increasingly urgent.

Previous research on social media use and subjective well-being has shown that positive self-presentation and social support significantly influence the subjective well-being of younger users (Kim & Lee, 2011). However, this study was conducted by interviewing American college students using Facebook, and over the past decade, academic research on the impact of social media use on subjective well-being has mostly favored minors and young adults, with research on the elderly being rare.

The study aims to examine whether positive and authentic self-presentation, along with social network size and perceived social support, influences elderly users' well-being and life satisfaction. Furthermore, the study examines whether perceived social support mediates the relationship between self-presentation and well-being. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how online behaviors promote psychological well-being, social engagement, and active aging, complementing and filling gaps in research on subjective well-being among elderly social media users.

## Literature Review

### 1. Self-presentation

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (2002) conceptualizes self-presentation as a strategic act of identity management, where individuals perform roles to influence how others perceive them. Digital platforms enable users to craft curated personas, often tailored to specific audiences, ranging from close friends to strangers, and reinforced through feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares (Choi & Sung, 2018). Unlike traditional face-to-face communication, social media users can more deliberately control their self-presentation and selectively expose themselves to receive responses and support.

Research indicates that self-presentation on social media encompasses both positive and honest aspects. Positive self-presentation aims to highlight strengths and achievements, fostering a favorable self-image (Toma & Handcock, 2013). Honest self-presentation, on the other hand, aligns more closely with authentic identity expression, which can enhance self-esteem and resilience. For elderly users, self-presentation often takes on a new significance as they seek social engagement, recognition, and a sense of belonging. The elderly are actively participating in content creation and self-expression, challenging the stereotype of digital marginalization (Feng et al., 2024). With the widespread popularity of the Rednote platform in China, many elderly internet celebrities have also transitioned to Rednote, leveraging their appeal to garner more attention and followers, and a trend of younger fan groups is emerging.

This engagement reflects broader concepts of active aging, where the elderly leverage digital media to redefine their identities, connect beyond traditional social boundaries, and maintain mental well-being. In particular, elderly women in countries like South Korea exemplify how digital self-presentation fosters social support, personal growth, and resilience, often serving as role models for others in their communities (Moon & Abidin, 2020). Moreover, studies on Facebook users reveal that positive self-presentation can provide emotional benefits, serving as a psychological buffer against threats to self-identity.

In summary, social media provides a broad platform for the elderly. Understanding these processes is crucial for exploring how online self-presentation affects their physical and mental health and social integration.

### 2. Positive Self-Presentation

Positive self-presentation involves intentionally sharing favorable traits, achievements, or self-affirming content to garner social approval and enhance self-image (Leary & Allen, 2011; Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013). It functions as a form of self-enhancement, aimed at boosting self-esteem and promoting psychological

well-being (Schlenker, 1975; Ungar & Theron, 2020). In social media contexts, individuals selectively display positive information to maximize social approval and minimize disapproval, thereby fostering happiness and social acceptance. Their survey, which used Facebook to measure the subjective well-being of American college students, indicated that positive self-presentation has a positive impact on subjective well-being.

### 3. Honest Self-Presentation

Honest self-presentation involves individuals authentically expressing their true qualities, emotions, and experiences on social media, without deliberate modification or concealment (Wang et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2018). This form of authentic self-disclosure includes openly sharing personal traits, feelings, and life details, fostering sincerity and inclusiveness. Behaviors associated with honest self-presentation include transparency about one's characteristics, frank sharing of emotional experiences, and avoiding selective or superficial self-revelations. Such authenticity promotes mutual understanding and trust, deepening relationships with family and friends. It also helps individuals gain emotional support, building bonding social capital, which reinforces close social ties and enhances social well-being. In existing research, honest self-presentation requires mediating factors to obtain subjective well-being. This study will focus on the differentiated research of elderly social media users.

### 4. Social Support

The concept of social support originated in the field of psychiatry in the 1970s, referring to the various forms of assistance, such as emotional, informational, and material, which individuals receive through interpersonal relationships. It plays a crucial role in helping individuals cope with life changes, crises, and environmental stressors, thereby promoting better social functioning and overall health (Li, 2021). Social support is often categorized into three channels: (a) social-emotional support, which includes empathy and companionship; (b) informational support, involving the provision of relevant knowledge; and (c) practical support, such as tangible goods or services (House, 1987). In previous studies on subjective well-being, the role of perceived social support cannot be ignored, so it is very necessary to reconfirm its influence in this study.

Research suggests that social platforms facilitate social interactions and can even substitute traditional support networks in some contexts (Walther, 1996; Kim & Lee, 2011; Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001). By participating in online groups, individuals find ways to cope with personal challenges and maintain social relationships, which are essential for psychological development and social adaptation. Social media enhances social support by creating new opportunities for connections beyond physical and temporal limitations. It influences social capital's resources which derived from social networks, which can impact emotional well-being and access to information (Utz & Muscanell, 2015). Strong ties, such as close friends and family, provide emotional support, while weak ties, more distant acquaintances, offer access to diverse perspectives and non-redundant information (Putnam, 2000; Granovetter, 1973). Especially in the context of online communities, users can seek various types of support, overcoming geographical and time barriers (Cho & Lee, 2019; Mazzoni et al., 2016; Pornsakulvanich, 2017; Stefanone et al., 2012). The diverse online and offline contexts also provide innovative avenues for studying perceived social support.

### 5. Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) pertains to an individual's evaluation of their own emotional experiences and quality of life (Annamori, 2024). It encompasses two primary dimensions: life satisfaction, which refers to a cognitive assessment of one's overall life quality, and emotional experience, which involves the balance of positive and negative emotions (Verduyn et al., 2020). SWB significantly influences daily functioning and overall life trajectory; higher levels of SWB are associated with better health, greater social support, higher income, and increased longevity, and these positive attitudes tend to foster happiness in others as well (Zhang et al., 2023; Faelens et al., 2021).

Research across diverse contexts, especially in Asian countries, demonstrates that Internet and social media use positively impact subjective well-being among the elderly. Social media facilitates information sharing, enhances communication, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and promotes social inclusion, all

contributing to improved psychological health and life satisfaction (Yang, Zeng & Yang, 2021; Won, et al., 2020). Through online display and interaction, individuals can influence social perceptions, build social trust, and experience positive emotions, which buffer against feelings of loneliness and depression (Tanabe et al., 2024 ). Moreover, the use of digital media encourages social participation and interaction, expanding social networks and support systems, which are crucial for psychological well-being. Social media use encourages social participation and interaction, expanding social networks and support systems, which are crucial for mental health. Research on TikTok and WeChat suggests that social interaction through online platforms can enhance subjective well-being by fostering social trust and reducing perceptions of social injustice or inequality (Yang et al., 2021). However, research focusing on the Rednote platform is scarce. In the academic exploration of SWB in online interactions, various constructs have been measured, including life satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, and vitality (Ishii, 2017; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). Enhancing social connections and promoting positive online self-presentation are important strategies for improving subjective well-being, which will have a positive effect on understanding and examining the factors that affect the well-being of elderly social users.

### 6. Conceptual Framework

Building on Kim and Lee's (2011) framework, as Figure 1, which examined how self-presentation affects the subjective well-being of college students on Facebook, this study applies a similar model to explore factors influencing elderly subjective well-being on Rednote. It retains the key self-presentation strategies of positive and honest self-expression, while replacing "number of friends" with "number of followers" to reflect contemporary social media metrics (Lee et al., 2020). The mediating role of social support remains central, as it is vital for understanding how online self-presentation impacts well-being. This expanded model, as Figure 2 emphasizes, subjective well-being as the outcome, providing a deeper analysis of how different self-presentation behaviours influence health and well-being among elderly users.

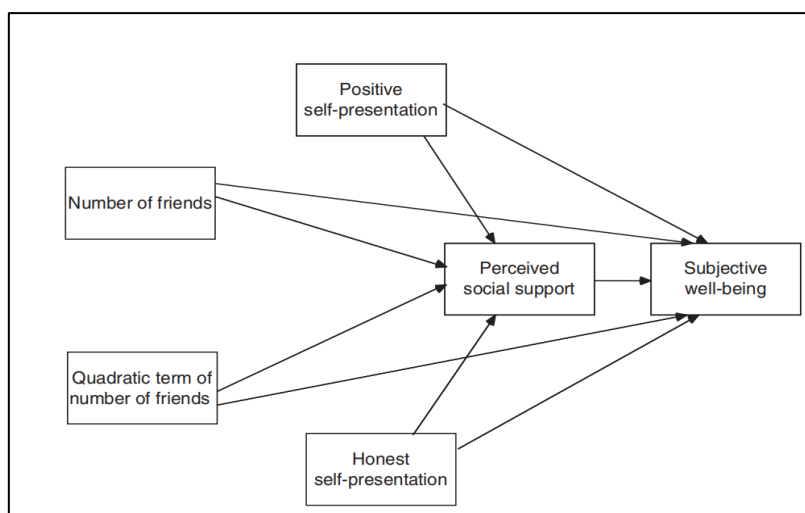


Figure 1. Conceptual framework  
Source: Kim & Lee (2011)

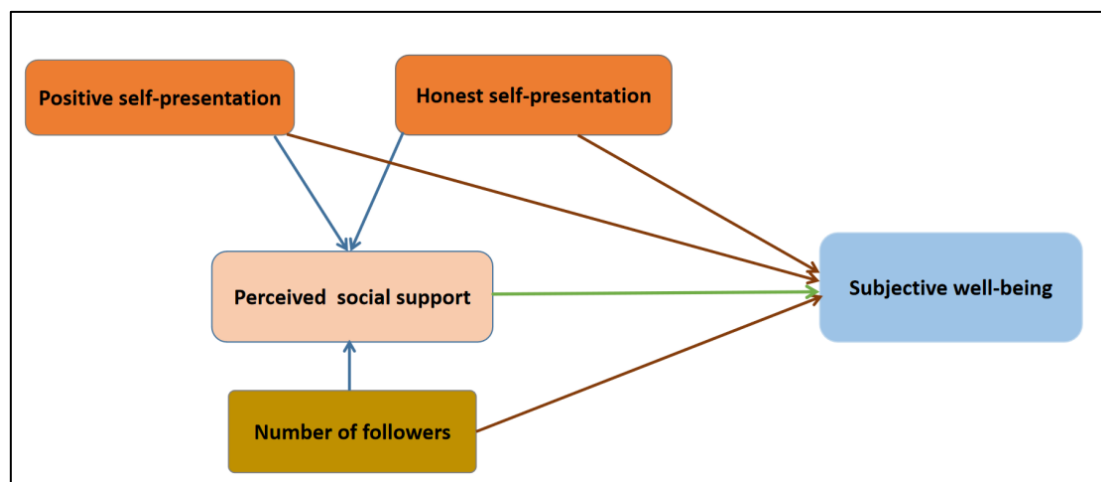


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of study  
Source: Author's research

## Methodology

In the operational phase, this study used scales or questionnaires to assess variables related to all hypotheses. These scales were carefully selected from existing literature and research, and each variable was measured using specific questions. The dependent variable, subjective well-being, was assessed using the Subjective Well-being Questionnaire. Variables such as positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, and number of followers were measured using the Online Self-Presentation Strategy Scale, and the mediating variable, perceived social support, was directly measured using the Perceived Social Support Scale.

### 1. Research Design

Data were collected entirely online via a structured questionnaire on the questionnaire star platform, utilizing a 7-point Likert scale for response options. The survey included four validated scales, totaling 31 questions, which were piloted and refined based on pilot results. Expert review confirmed the instrument's reliability and validity before full deployment. Collected data underwent descriptive analysis to summarize sample characteristics, reliability testing (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) to ensure internal consistency, and normality assessments to validate the data distribution. Additionally, demographic information was analyzed to understand respondent profiles. The hypothesized relationships within the proposed model were tested using SPSS for initial descriptive and reliability analysis, and PLS-SEM for hypothesis testing, providing a robust framework for examining the research questions.

### 2. Respondents and Sampling Techniques

Stratified sampling is a probabilistic sampling technique that involves dividing the population into distinct, non-overlapping strata based on specific characteristics or criteria. Subsequently, random or systematic sampling is independently conducted within each stratum, and the resulting samples are combined to form the overall sample. In this study, focusing on elderly Rednote users, factors such as age groups and usage frequency are critical to the accuracy and representativeness of the research results. Over-concentrated or overly dispersed strata can distort findings, and simple random sampling may fail to effectively capture key subgroups, such as high-frequency content creators, whose smaller population sizes might lead to their omission or insufficient representation in the sample.

To enhance sampling quality, this study partnered with local social media operators who possess detailed user activity data, content tags, and geographic information. Collaborating with Sanya Kaishi Story Co., Ltd., the research team obtained authentic user stratification data based on age: specifically, users aged 50 or older who logged in within the past month. This real-world data-enabled stratification ensures precise and efficient sampling, addressing potential biases and improving the scientific rigor of the study.

### 3. Instruments

In the operational phase, this study employed scales and questionnaires to measure variables related to the hypotheses. These instruments were carefully selected from existing literature to ensure validity and reliability. The dependent variable, subjective well-being, was assessed using the Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire. Positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, and the number of followers were measured with the Online Self-Presentation Strategy Scale, which has been validated in the Chinese context. Perceived social support was directly evaluated using the Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS), known for its strong association with mental health outcomes. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was used to assess overall life satisfaction, exhibiting high reliability but not covering emotional health or domain-specific satisfaction. The Social Support Rating Scale (SSRS) measures objective, subjective, and utilization aspects of social support, widely used across China.

Table 1: The scales and sources

	1	2	3	4
Name of scale	Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (SWQ)(SWLS)	Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS)	Self-Presentation Online Strategies Scale (SPOSS)	Social Support Rating Scale(SSRS)
Scholar	Diener (1985) Wei et al. (2022) Phetparyoon & Surakarn (2024) Ekici et al. (2018) Dahiya & Rangnekar (2018) Lianda & Himawan (2022)	Blumenthal et al. (1987) Bu et al. 2023) Peng et al. (2023) Yu et al. (2022) Fengbo et al. (2024)	Kim & Lee (2011) translated into Chinese by Bao (2024) Strimbu & O'Connell(2019) Chen et al.(2023) Duan et al.(2020)	Xiao et al. (2020) Sun et al. (2020) Bao et al. (2023) Li et al. (2021) Zhan et al. (2022) Wei et al. (2022)

Sources: Author's work (2024)

### 4. Data Collection Process

Before the study, several ethical procedures were completed, beginning with an application for ethical review from the affiliated institution. After receiving approval, a research letter was issued to the operating company of Rednote in Sanya, Sanya Start Story Culture Co., LTD, Hainan Province, to facilitate the distribution of the questionnaires. The research proposal outlined the research questions, objectives, and ethical considerations, including data confidentiality, and emphasized voluntary participation.

### 5. Data Analysis

Following data screening with SPSS 26.0, a total of 413 valid questionnaires were retained, with balanced gender representation (44.79% male, 55.21% female). Data were processed using SPSS and Smart PLS 4.0. The variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis confirmed that multicollinearity was not an issue. Measurement validity was assessed through tests of convergent and discriminant validity, confirming the reliability of the construct measures. The structural model's explanatory power was evaluated with R<sup>2</sup>, which was 0.406 for subjective well-being, aligning with the three-factor happiness model (affective, cognitive, social). The Q<sup>2</sup> value was 0.32, indicating satisfactory predictive accuracy of the model.

### The Findings

The findings indicate that honest self-presentation, number of followers, and perceived social support directly and significantly influence the subjective well-being of elderly Rednote users. These results in Table 2 underscore the vital role of social support and online interactions among elderly users.

Table 2. Path analysis

	Beta	Coefficient	Standard deviation	T Statistics	P-value	Decision
Positive Self-Presentation-> Subjective Well-being	0.096	0.097	0.052	1.852	0.064	NO
Honest Self-Presentation -> Subjective Well-being	0.147	0.145	0.052	2.853	0.004	YES
Number of Followers -> Subjective Well-being	0.179	0.18	0.047	3.813	0	YES
Perceived Social Support -> Subjective Well-being	0.167	0.167	0.051	3.255	0.001	YES
Positive Self-Presentation -> Subjective Well-being	0.024	0.025	0.012	2.033	0.042	YES
Perceived Social Support -> Subjective Well-being	0.03	0.029	0.012	2.373	0.018	YES
Honest Self-Presentation -> Perceived Social Support -> Subjective Well-being	0.023	0.023	0.011	2.041	0.041	YES
Number of Followers -> Perceived Social Support -> Subjective Well-being						

Sources: Author's work (2024)

Path in Table 2 analysis revealed significant relationships among the constructs. Positive self-presentation significantly affected perceived social support ( $\beta=0.147, t=2.785, p=0.005$ ) but did not directly impact subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.096, t=1.852, p=0.064$ ). Honest self-presentation positively influenced both perceived social support ( $\beta=0.178, t=3.528, p<0.001$ ) and subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.147, t=2.853, p=0.004$ ). The number of followers also positively affected perceived social support ( $\beta=0.139, t=2.726, p=0.006$ ) and subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.179, t=3.813, p<0.001$ ). Perceived social support significantly influenced subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.167, t=3.255, p=0.001$ ).

Contrary to Kim and Lee (2011), these findings suggest that external-focused behaviours like positive self-presentation, often driven by extrinsic motivation, inhibit authentic self-expression and fail to satisfy internal needs, aligning with self-determination theory (Liu et al., 2024). Excessive emphasis on high-profile self-presentation or appearance-enhancement, facilitated by beauty technologies and AI editing, can lead to negative emotions such as jealousy, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance, ultimately reducing well-being (Clark et al., 2021; Cotten et al., 2022; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

In contrast, honest self-presentation showed a significant positive effect on subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.147, p=0.004$ ), reflecting its role in fostering self-consistency and intrinsic satisfaction. This aligns with SDT, which posits that authentic expression satisfies psychological needs like autonomy and belonging, thus enhancing well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, recent studies confirm that honest self-presentation among the elderly is directly associated with reduced depression and increased life satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2025; Chu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the intergenerational digital divide highlights the importance for older users to rely on sincere self-presentation to foster trust and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Uhls et al., 2021). Consequently, authentic self-presentation significantly enhances the subjective well-being of the elderly by

fulfilling their need for genuineness, especially on platforms emphasizing real interactions. Path analysis revealed that the number of followers has a highly significant positive effect on subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.179$ ,  $t=3.813$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The growth in followers provides more social resources, enhancing individuals' sense of control and self-efficacy (Bourdieu, 2011).

As offline social circles wane with age, the elderly increasingly use the number of online followers as a measure of social importance (Wilson-Nash et al., 2023). The rise of digital platforms has turned follower counts into indicators of success and respect, meeting the recognition needs of older users. For instance, Chen and Li (2022) found that, among Chinese elderly on Douyin, having over 500 followers was directly associated with higher life satisfaction. Similarly, Liu et al. (2024) demonstrated that the number of followers on Rednote had a significant direct effect on subjective well-being, even after accounting for social support factors.

## Discussion

This study investigates the effects of positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, and the number of followers on the subjective well-being of elderly Rednote users, aiming to validate the self-presentation model proposed by Kim and Li (2011). The findings reveal that, collectively, positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, and the number of followers influence subjective well-being. However, contrary to prior research, positive self-presentation did not directly enhance subjective well-being. Instead, perceived social support played a significant mediating role, amplifying the impact of these factors and promoting elderly well-being (Li, 2021). Based on these insights, several measures are proposed to actively support aging, establishing a comprehensive support system involving government, community, and society, promoting digital literacy through community training programs, upgrading age-friendly social media platforms, and strengthening network security to prevent online fraud, thereby ensuring a safer digital environment for seniors. This study has been confirmed to show that strengthening social connections and promoting positive, genuine online self-presentation are necessary strategies for improving subjective well-being, especially among the elderly who use social media.

This study has several limitations. It focused solely on the Rednote platform, limiting generalizability to other social media. The sample was restricted to elderly residents of Sanya, affecting regional applicability. Variations in the definition of "elderly" across countries may impact cross-cultural comparisons. Additionally, the quantitative approach cannot capture in-depth attitudes or emotional nuances, suggesting that future research should include qualitative methods for deeper insights (Ishii, 2017; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

## Conclusion

This study underscores the increasing role of social media in enriching the lives of the elderly and examines how digital engagement impacts their subjective well-being (Elpidia et al, 2025). Building on the SMU-SWB model proposed by Kim and Li (2011), the results reveal that factors influencing well-being among older Rednote users differ notably from those affecting younger social media users. Grounded in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1959), specifically, positive self-presentation on social media directly contributes to emotional well-being, while honest and authentic self-presentation indirectly enhances well-being through fostering social support and meaningful social interactions.

These insights suggest that digital media can serve as a powerful tool to mitigate social isolation, which is often associated with aging and retirement. Engaging actively on social platforms helps older adults maintain social connections, increase their sense of belonging, and promote psychological resilience. The study emphasizes the importance of designing digital interventions and policies that encourage positive online engagement, customized to meet the unique needs of aging populations. Ultimately, these efforts can facilitate healthy aging, reduce loneliness, and promote social inclusivity, ensuring that older adults can fully benefit from the opportunities offered by digital aging.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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