

# Using children's digital picture books to teach disease preventive behaviors: A visual analysis of the Duma Says series

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Received: 2025-05-18

Accepted: 2025-08-04

Published: 2026-01-01

- A – Research concept and design
- B – Collection and/or assembly of data
- C – Data analysis and interpretation
- D – Writing the article
- E – Critical revision of the article
- F – Final approval of article



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** During health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, children require accessible and developmentally appropriate resources to understand disease prevention and health-related behaviors. Children's digital picture books have emerged as a promising medium for conveying public health messages through visual storytelling and age-appropriate narratives.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to examine how children's digital picture books represent disease preventive behaviors and moral values, using the Duma Says series as a case study.

**Methods:** A qualitative visual and textual analysis was conducted on four digital picture books from the Duma Says Collector's Edition. The study employed qualitative visual analysis and a critical discourse approach to examine representations of hygiene practices, social responsibility, and community engagement embedded in both images and narratives.

**Results:** The findings indicate that the Duma Says series effectively integrates key COVID-19 preventive behaviors—such as handwashing, mask-wearing, social distancing, and sanitation—within child-friendly language and culturally contextualized visuals. In addition to promoting health practices, the books emphasize values of hope, responsibility, cooperation, and service, portraying children as active contributors to community well-being during a crisis.

**Conclusions:** Children's digital picture books, such as the Duma Says series, function as effective educational tools for promoting disease prevention awareness and values-based learning. Incorporating culturally grounded digital picture books into early childhood and health education may strengthen children's health literacy, emotional resilience, and sense of social responsibility during public health emergencies.

**Keywords:** children's literature, digital picture books, disease prevention, health education, visual analysis.

**How to cite this article:** Sarad, E., Cabatuan, C., Tionson, C., & Subong, A. G. (2026). Using children's digital picture books to teach disease preventive behaviors: A visual analysis of the Duma Says series. *Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education & Learning Innovation*, 1(2), 66-88. <https://doi.org/10.56003/jaieli.v1i2.572>

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted family routines on a global scale, with far-reaching economic and social consequences that directly affect children's health and well-being. In the absence of effective mitigating interventions, the number of children living in poverty-affected households worldwide may reach over 725 million, with nearly two-thirds residing in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNICEF, 2020a). These conditions intensify children's vulnerability during public health emergencies and threaten their overall development.

Measures implemented to control the spread of pandemics—such as mobility restrictions, school closures, and quarantines—have introduced additional risks to children's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Prolonged school closures and increased time spent online have heightened children's exposure to stress and digital safety risks, including susceptibility to online predators (Child Rights Now, 2020). These circumstances may jeopardize the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to health, education, and child protection. Evidence suggests that environmental stressors experienced during pandemics can influence children's learning capacities and biological development, further underscoring children's health as a central concern within the SDGs framework (Araújo, 2021). Vulnerable groups—including children living in poverty, children with disabilities, those in out-of-home care or detention, refugee children, and children at risk of child labor—face compounded risks during such crises (OECD, 2020).

In response to these challenges, scholars have emphasized the importance of child-friendly educational resources that help children make sense of crisis situations. Several studies highlight the role of children's literature—particularly digital picture books—in supporting children's understanding of health emergencies. Blazić (2023) demonstrated that pandemic picture books assist children in interpreting safety protocols, while Fahrannisa et al. (2022) found that short stories can enhance children's preventive behaviors during COVID-19. Similarly, Mustakim et al. (2018) underscored the capacity of literary texts to improve engagement and comprehension in disrupted learning contexts. Despite these contributions, existing studies have largely focused on general or Western-oriented materials, revealing a gap in research on cross-cultural or non-Western digital picture books that integrate both health education and values-based learning.

From a child rights perspective, ensuring children's access to appropriate information and protection during crises is a global imperative. Child protection policies that uphold children's rights, prioritize vulnerable populations, and provide accessible educational resources are essential during emergencies. Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) mandates the protection of children from all forms of physical or mental harm, including neglect and exploitation, emphasizing the need for safe and supportive learning environments during times of uncertainty.

Children must receive information that is comprehensible, age-appropriate, and naturally embedded in their everyday experiences. Literature plays a crucial role in this process, as it enables children to ask questions, understand ongoing events, and develop emotional resilience. Kamin (2020) noted that children's literature helps young readers appreciate healthcare workers, adapt to new learning modalities, and identify positive meanings amid crises. COVID-19 picture books, in particular, have

been shown to teach children protective behaviors and health protocols in engaging and reassuring ways (Blazić, 2023). Moreover, the dissemination of accurate scientific information through child-friendly narratives can reduce children's fears and misconceptions about pandemics (UNICEF, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020c).

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on the Duma Says series, a South African digital picture book collection that remains underexplored in research on children's pandemic education. This study is novel in its combined visual and textual analysis of a culturally grounded, non-Western digital picture book series, examining how health protocols and moral values are communicated to young readers through narrative and imagery.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how children's digital picture books portray pandemic-related health issues, convey preventive behaviors, and embed moral and social values that support children's understanding of COVID-19. By analyzing the Duma Says series, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on children's health education by demonstrating how culturally contextualized digital picture books can promote disease prevention awareness, emotional resilience, and social responsibility. The findings offer practical implications for educators, parents, and curriculum developers seeking inclusive and effective educational tools for children during public health emergencies.

## METHODS

### Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using visual and textual analysis to examine representations of disease preventive behaviors and moral values in children's digital picture books. The unit of analysis comprised four digital picture books from the Duma Says Collector's Edition written and illustrated by Nathi Ngubane. These books were selected because of their explicit focus on COVID-19-related health practices and their portrayal of children as active agents in community-based pandemic response.

The study did not involve human participants. Instead, the primary data sources were digital visual and textual materials embedded in the selected children's books. The focus on a single South African digital picture book series allowed for an in-depth and contextualized analysis of culturally grounded narratives relevant to health education during pandemics.

### Ethical approval statement

Ethics clearance was not required for this study as it did not involve human participants, personal data, or sensitive information. The research analyzed publicly available digital children's literature, and all materials were used solely for academic and educational purposes.

### Research Instruments

This study adopted qualitative visual analysis, an approach rooted in anthropological and sociological research traditions (Rouse, 2013). While earlier methods in social research relied heavily on coding frequencies or quantifying observable behaviors, qualitative visual analysis emphasizes the interpretation of images as sources of meaning and experience (Rouse, 2013).

To facilitate systematic analysis, the researchers employed visual coding sheets as analytic instruments. These coding sheets guided the identification of recurring patterns across visual and textual elements of the books. The coding framework focused on three key domains:

- 1) Hygiene behaviors, including handwashing, mask-wearing, and sanitation practices;
- 2) Moral values, such as service, hope, responsibility, and cooperation; and
- 3) Representational themes, including depictions of childhood, family relations, and community collaboration.

These instruments enabled a structured examination of how visual imagery and narrative content jointly communicate public health messages to young readers.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a critical discourse approach informed by visual narrative analysis. The emergence of children's books during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects global efforts to educate young audiences about health protocols and coping strategies aligned with guidelines from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). The *Duma Says* series exemplifies this trend by embedding messages of hygiene, empathy, resilience, and social responsibility within child-centered narratives.

The analytical process followed visual narrative analysis procedures as outlined by [Caldwell & Wilbraham \(2018\)](#) and [Caldwell, Falcus & Sako \(2021\)](#), situated within a critical discourse framework that views visual and textual media as both reflective and constitutive of social and cultural norms ([Rose, 2012](#)). Each book was examined page by page, with attention given to depicted behaviors, character interactions, symbolic imagery, and contextual cues related to pandemic response.

The researchers employed emergent thematic coding, memo writing, and axial coding to identify patterns and relationships across the dataset. Although the study was limited to a single South African digital picture book series, this focus enabled rich insights into indigenous values, community dynamics, and children's roles in public health promotion. Moreover, the selected texts offered a comparative cultural perspective that may inform health education practices beyond the South African context, particularly for children in the Philippines.

## RESULTS

"Duma says" is a children's book series written and illustrated by Nathi Ngubane, a Durban native, and produced by the experimental Social Bandit Media, based in Jozi and New York. The tale follows Duma, his sister Zihle, and their friends as they struggle to navigate their way through the pandemic, and this book teaches children how to cope in these trying times. *Duma Says* is an initiative and a valuable tool for teaching children about the COVID-19 virus. It benefits both textual and visual learners because it includes bright graphics that accompany the content. [Table 1](#) shows information on the details of the pandemic children's literature.

### Qualitative Visual Analysis of Duma Says

The health protocols are observed in the stories, including social distancing, wearing masks, maintaining cleanliness, and featuring Doc Sam as a frontline worker. The author reminded children, parents, families, and communities to find new ways to learn and help one another thrive amidst the COVID-19 crisis by

introducing the series of Duma Says. The books portray people in the roles they need to play in the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that even children can contribute to the community. Table 2 describes the main characters of the books, while Table 3 examines the stories relative to the signs and symptoms of the virus.

**Table 1.** Basic information Details of Duma Says

Title of the Book	Author / Illustrator	Language & Year Published	Place of Publication	Publisher /s	Types of Books / No. of Pages
Duma Says: Let's live! (Collector's Edition)	Nathi Ngubane	English / 2021	South Africa	Social Bandit Media	Digital Picture books 78 pp
Nathi Says: Why I created this series	Nathi Ngubane	English / 2021	South Africa	Social Bandit Media	Digital Picture books 6-16
1. Duma Says: Wash your hands, Wear a mask	Nathi Ngubane	English / 2021	South Africa	Social Bandit Media	Digital Picture books 8-34
2. Duma Says: Let's Learn	Nathi Ngubane	English / 2021	South Africa	Social Bandit Media	Digital Picture books 36-54
3. Duma Says: Come play with us	Nathi Ngubane	English / 2021	South Africa	Social Bandit Media	Digital Picture books 56-78

**Table 2.** Description and characters shown in the cover pages of Duma says

Book#	Description of Cover Pages	Characters shown in Cover Pages
<b>Main Cover Page</b>	'Duma says' is a fictional story about Duma and his companions who live in an informal settlement in South Africa during the COVID-19 outbreak. The series, written by Nathi Ngubane, centers around Duma and his pals finding new and unusual methods to continue learning and playing despite the coronavirus in South Africa. Moreover, there are 4 stories under the Duma Says, collector's edition.	The characters shown in the cover page are Duma, his community, and the doctor as a front liner.
<b>Prologue</b>	Nathi Says: Why I created this series, is a reminder to all parents and children to protect themselves from the wrath of covid-19 and to continue learning despite the odds. This book is a series, namely: Duma Says: Wash your hands, wear a mask; Duma Says: Let's Learn; and Duma Says: Come play with us.	Nathi Ngubane, the author himself is featured in the cover page, together with Duma and his friends.
<b>Book 1</b>	Duma Says: Wash your hands, wear a mask, it accentuates a reminder to protect everyone and as well as the community by wearing masks when always going out and washing/sanitizing hands. It also highlights the initiative of Duma and his sisters to provide masks to those who don't face masks, especially the adults who are vulnerable.	Duma wearing a mask while showing his community is shown on the cover page of the book.
<b>Book 2</b>	The book titled: "Duma Says: Let's Learn", is a story that shows that coronavirus is not a hindrance to continue learning. Numerous students have been affected due school closures and home-based education is one of the reforms to ameliorate educational institutions. Furthermore, Duma, Zinhle and his friend Lebo conducted classes to support learning on children in their community.	Duma wearing a mask while pointing out their learning shelter together with his sister Zinhle and the children.
<b>Book 3</b>	"Duma Says: Come play with us!", depicts that child enjoys playing like skipping rope during pandemic inside their learning shelter. It portrays how important playing to maintain a healthy body and to establish rapport within their playmates. Children are not just enjoying playing but also following the health protocols through wearing face masks and observing social distancing.	Duma, a ten-year-old boy and his friends playing rope skipping.

**Table 3.** Description and characters shown in the cover pages of Duma says

Book#	Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 observed in the story (inside pictures)	Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 that can be read in the story	Activities of the characters prior to pandemic, if any	Activities of the characters during the pandemic	List all things found in the inside pages demonstrating the use of protection equipment etc. (mask, etc.)
Nathi Says: Why I created this series	Sneezing was highlighted in the story.	Nathi Says, "When I have a cough or sneeze, I always cover my mouth so I can protect those around me."		Duma and his siblings really care about their community, so they sewed masks and gave it to their neighbors, and they also run a little learning shelter to help children learn.	The things found in the story are the following: masks together with the safety health protocols, fruits and vegetables for good health, and little learning shelter for children.
1. Duma Says: Wash your hands, wear a mask!	Coughing was mentioned in the story.	Duma's mother reminds, "Wash your hands with soap for 20 seconds and cover your mouth when you cough."	1. Duma plays with his friends. 2. Wandile hugs his friends. 3. Zinhle shares lip gloss with her friends.	With the use of clothes and elastic bands from the church members, Duma and his siblings made masks for the members of their community.	Washing hands with soap for 20 seconds and spraying sanitizer after.  Wearing mask correctly by covering nose and mouth.
2. Duma Says: Let's Learn!	Coughing and sneezing was show in the picture.		1. Duma plays with his friend and pet. 2. Zinhle stays indoors and reads her schoolbooks	The schools are closed because of the pandemic; therefore, Duma, Zinhle and his friend Lebo conducted classes for the community children.	Promote social distancing. Always wear face mask Always wash your hand
3. Duma Says: Come play with us!	At the first paragraph of the story, the picture portrays a sick person lying in bed who's having a fever.			Every morning the kids go to their learning shelter to sing their favorite song, read their favorite stories, and learn something new every day. They also enjoyed playing soccer, rope skipping and hide and go seek.	The protection equipment shown in the story were face masks, hand sanitizers, and a towel.

The four cover pages (Figure 1) illustrate that wearing masks and washing hands regularly are essential measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The author highlights the roles children play in protecting their community. In the narrative, children are encouraged to extend help by providing preventive equipment, such as masks, to others and educating them on how to keep themselves clean and safe from the coronavirus by regularly washing and sanitizing their hands. The cover pages of the book encourage children to continue learning at home despite the pandemic-

stricken educational system. The author emphasized that learning must continue despite the threats caused by COVID-19.



Figure 1. Books' cover pages. With Permission from Author

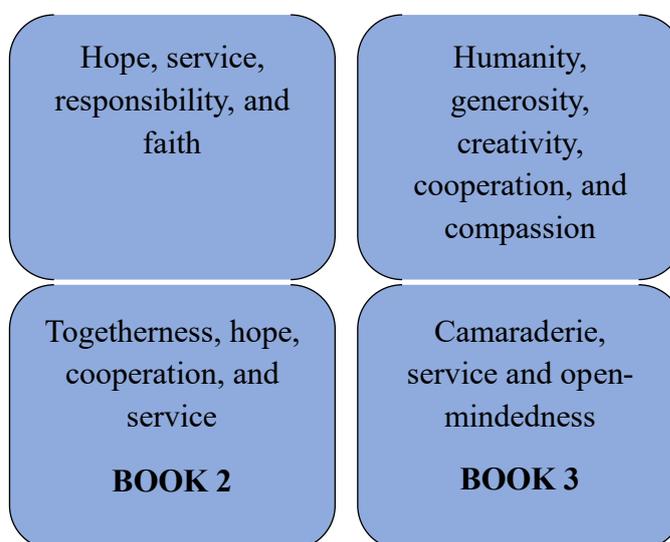


Figure 2. Values that children can learn from the COVID-19 Children's Literature

Doctor Sam said in the last part of the story that: "The most important thing is to keep your education going, knowledge is power!" This strong message from the book is a manifestation that everyone's dreams are not cancelled and that children must be given rights and protection to continue education without falling into the risks of the virus. The cover pages delineate the idea of enjoying childhood during this pressing

time. Children can still enjoy life, but they must also follow health protocols, such as social distancing and wearing face masks. The story serves as an excellent reminder to all readers of the importance of effective communication. During these trying times, people should not isolate themselves; instead, they should be given opportunities to connect or reconnect with their families, establish rapport, and extend a helping hand to those in need. Moreover, the visual elements and moral lessons included in the books are appropriate to all children.

Children can learn values from the books as interpreted based on the visuals and text analysis (Figure 2). In the prologue, the author explicates the role of children in mitigating the rising cases of COVID-19. He also emphasized community outreach, such as providing free DIY face masks to children's neighbors, especially to vulnerable individuals. The spirit of community service has been emphasized in the books. Book 1 discusses why Nathi, the author, created the book, mentioning that it is in response to a pressing situation and what children can do about it. Moreover, children can learn to follow simple safety protocols, such as properly wearing a mask and regularly washing and sanitizing their hands, to help lessen the spread of the coronavirus. With this, children are not only protecting themselves but also their community. Book 2 realistically portrays school closures leading to home-based learning. However, a message can be seen and felt in the narrative, allowing children to realize that their dreams are not canceled, and they have their family to provide academic support. Book 2 also educates children on home-based education and how families can provide simple academic support for children during distance learning. Lastly, Book 3 demonstrates that children should adhere to safety and health rules. The story shows that when they like to play, they should be in a distant game. After playing, they should wash their hands properly. Book 3 explains the crucial role of play in children's growth and development, as well as how to enjoy playing while still following health protocols.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined how children's digital picture books function as educational and psychosocial tools during public health crises, using the *Duma Says: Let's Live! Adventures during a Time of COVID-19* series as a focal case. In line with the broader emergence of pandemic-themed children's literature, the *Duma Says* series presents practical strategies for preventing infection and transmission while encouraging children to take responsibility for their own health and that of their families and communities. The narratives emphasize continuity of learning despite social restrictions and depict collective efforts to manage the effects of the virus, highlighting children's agency during times of crisis.

A central finding of this study is the consistent and explicit representation of disease preventive behaviors throughout the series. Visuals and narratives depict recommended health protocols, including covering one's mouth when coughing, washing hands for at least 20 seconds, using sanitizers, wearing masks properly, avoiding crowded spaces, and practicing physical distancing of at least six feet. These behaviors are embedded within everyday scenes and social interactions among peers, family members, and caregivers, which aligns with pedagogical approaches that normalize health practices through familiar routines. Such representations support the notion that preventive behaviors become more meaningful and achievable for young readers when they are contextualized within relatable daily experiences.

Beyond physical health practices, the Duma Says series places strong emphasis on affective and moral dimensions of pandemic education. The books convey values such as hope, empathy, responsibility, and community service, which help children cope emotionally with the uncertainty and stress associated with COVID-19. Acts such as distributing handmade masks and assisting peers with learning portray children as capable contributors rather than passive recipients of adult protection. This finding resonates with [Blazić \(2023\)](#), who observed that children's pandemic books generally adopt a positive tone despite addressing serious social issues, enabling children to adapt to changing environments and recover from pandemic-related pressures.

The findings further reinforce the broader educational value of children's literature in crisis contexts. Literature not only facilitates enjoyment and engagement but also supports language development and conceptual understanding ([Mustakim et al., 2018](#)). Through repeated exposure to narrative language and visual cues, children can develop communication skills, expand vocabulary, and bridge the gap between written and spoken language. These benefits are particularly important during periods of disrupted schooling, when alternative learning resources become essential.

Consistent with prior research, the present findings support the role of literary texts in fostering cultural awareness and addressing real-world issues. [Babae & Yahya \(2014\)](#) highlighted literature's capacity to broaden children's understanding of diverse cultures and societies, while [Fahrannisa et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that short stories can increase children's preventive behaviors during the pandemic by enhancing their understanding of health protocols. In this study, the South African cultural context of Duma Says offered young readers—especially those from different national backgrounds—exposure to alternative community-based responses to health crises, thereby enriching their global perspectives.

From a cognitive development standpoint, children's literature enables learners to respond to texts critically and form their own interpretations ([Crippen, 2012](#)). The open-ended nature of narratives encourages higher-order thinking as children connect prior knowledge with new information ([Rashid et al., 2010](#)). Furthermore, literature has been shown to promote critical thinking, ethical reflection, and cross-cultural comparison ([Amer, 2012](#)), as well as values such as fairness and appreciation for diversity ([Baker, Martin, & Pence, 2008](#)). The Duma Says series exemplifies these functions by integrating moral reasoning and social responsibility into accessible pandemic narratives.

Overall, Duma Says emerges as a rich educational resource that integrates pandemic preparedness, moral education, and cultural context. The findings suggest that culturally grounded digital picture books can enhance children's health literacy while simultaneously supporting emotional resilience and character development. Consequently, educators and curriculum developers are encouraged to incorporate such resources into health literacy and character education programs, particularly during times of crisis when children require both informational clarity and emotional support.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focused on a single digital picture book series from South Africa, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or national contexts. Second, the study relied solely on qualitative visual and textual

analysis and did not include empirical data from child readers, parents, or educators regarding how the books are interpreted or used in practice. Future research may benefit from incorporating interviews, focus groups, or classroom-based observations to examine children's responses to pandemic-themed literature. Additionally, comparative studies involving multiple digital picture book series from different regions could further strengthen understanding of how cultural contexts shape health communication in children's literature.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that children's disease prevention storybooks, such as the *Duma Says! Collector's Edition*, serve as effective educational resources for introducing young learners to pandemic-related realities in an age-appropriate and meaningful manner. Through visual storytelling and narrative structures, the books help children understand their roles within the community, recognize preventive health behaviors, and appreciate collective responsibility during public health emergencies. The visual elements—depicting home-based activities, hygiene practices, and safety protocols—play a crucial role in reinforcing messages about sanitation, precautionary measures, and disease prevention.

Beyond promoting health behaviors, the findings reveal that the *Duma Says* series is strongly values-driven, embedding moral lessons such as responsibility, cooperation, empathy, and service. These values support children's emotional and social development while encouraging positive attitudes toward hygiene and community engagement. As a form of children's literature, the series underscores the broader educational function of storytelling as a medium for conveying both practical knowledge and cultural values. Although situated within the South African context, the narratives present realistic and universal representations of safety protocols that resonate with children's lived experiences in other settings, including the Philippines. This cross-cultural relevance highlights the potential of children's literature to foster inclusive health education and global awareness.

The findings suggest important implications for educational practice. Educational institutions, particularly in developing countries such as the Philippines, are encouraged to integrate culturally relevant and localized digital picture books into early-grade curricula. Such integration can simultaneously promote literacy, health awareness, emotional resilience, and global citizenship. Educators and curriculum developers may also utilize digital picture books as complementary learning materials in health education, character education, and crisis-response learning contexts.

Future studies may expand upon this research by incorporating empirical data from children, parents, and teachers to explore how young readers interpret and internalize pandemic narratives. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, or classroom-based observations could provide deeper insights into children's comprehension and emotional responses. Additionally, comparative studies involving multiple digital picture book series from different cultural contexts would further enhance understanding of how children's literature can support disease prevention education across diverse societies.

## AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist with language refinement and manuscript editing. The authors take full responsibility for the content and integrity of the study.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to their research mentor for the valuable guidance, constructive feedback, and academic support provided throughout the completion of this study. The authors also extend their gratitude to Nathi Ngubane, the writer and illustrator of *Duma Says: Let's Live! Collector's Edition*, for granting permission to use his digital picture books as the primary materials for this research.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the qualitative nature of the visual analysis and copyright restrictions related to the use of digital children's picture books, the full dataset is not publicly available. However, detailed descriptions of the analyzed materials, analytic procedures, and relevant excerpts are provided within the article to ensure transparency and replicability.

## FUNDING

This research does not receive external funding.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that this research is free from conflicts of interest with any party.

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