

## Representations of Resilience in Novels by Minangkabau Authors: A Comparative Analysis

Alexander Stark<sup>1\*</sup>, Balazs Huszka<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Friedrich-Alexander-University, Erlangen, Germany.

Email: alexstark35@yahoo.de

<sup>2</sup>Language Centre, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Gadong, Brunei Darussalam.

Email: balazs.huszka@ubd.edu.bn

### ABSTRACT

Resilience is a topic that is of growing importance. It is a science that analyzes the way on how to manage stressful and challenging situations. In this article, the researchers look at two famous Indonesian novels, namely *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* (Sufferings leads to blessing) and *Terusir* (Expelled). In both novels, the two main protagonists face major challenges that affect their well-being. They have to be resilient to avoid being overwhelmed by the situation. A structuralist approach was used to analyze the patterns of resilience. It was detected that the two major protagonists use different strategies to cope with difficult situations. One reason was the gender-specific backgrounds of the major figures. This research also argues that novels can contribute to the field of resilience studies by providing vivid examples. Further research on the reading experience could offer additional insights.

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (\*):

Alexander Stark  
(alexstark35@yahoo.de)

### KEYWORDS:

Hamka  
Resilience  
Sengsara Membawa Nikmat  
Terusir  
Tulis Sutan Sati

### CITATION:

Alexander, S., & Balazs, H. (2026). Representations of Resilience in Novels by Minangkabau Authors: A Comparative Analysis. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(4), e003900. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i4.3900>

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have investigated resilience through the lens of fictional characters, examining the strategies they employ. It further argues that literature itself contributes meaningfully to this field by vividly illustrating how individuals can navigate and cope with challenging situations.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing number of publications on resilience. However, it is often related to finding strategies for people to handle difficult situations. During a person's lifetime, there are events that threaten their well-being. A disease, a financial situation, and many other events might affect an individual's life. If someone is unable to develop strategies to cope with such events, the consequences can be severe. A person might take drugs, become depressed, or even commit suicide. Therefore, some scientists developed particular strategies on how to behave in times of distress. However, in this article, the researchers argue that some novels illustrate such behavioral patterns. The advantages of novels are that they can reach more readers and are easier to understand.

In this article, the researchers will examine two novels written in colonial times by two Minangkabau authors, namely Tulis Sutan Sati and Hamka. The novels analyzed regarding resilience are *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* (Suffering leads to blessing) and *Terusir* (Expelled). In both novels, the main protagonists face difficult situations and must learn to adapt. Both authors are of Minangkabau origin. The culture likely shapes unique ways of responding to difficult situations. This article will explore that topic.

### 1.1. Towards an Understanding of Resilience

In recent years, there is a growing number of publications regarding the concept of resilience (Southwick et al., 2014). These publications offered different forms of definitions of the term 'resilience'. The American Psychological Association defines it as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress" (American Psychological Association, 2014, para. 4).

The definition offered by the American Psychological Association drew some criticism. Some scholars asked whether it should be treated as a process or an outcome. The major problem is that the term is only related to psychological resilience. However, in the history of resilience, the term 'resilience' itself was used in mechanical science (Rigby & Zemanek, 2026). The reason is that the term has two meanings according to the Oxford Learners' Dictionary:

- i. The ability of people or things to recover quickly after something unpleasant, such as shock, injury, etc.
- ii. The ability of a substance to return to its original shape after it has been bent, stretched or pressed.<sup>1</sup>

In the mechanical sciences, the second definition was decisive. In the 1950s, the term was used in the field of psychology and later in ecology (Böhme, 2019; Rigby & Zemanek, 2026). The broader understanding of the term resilience led to a growing number of publications. However, in this article, the researchers will focus on the psychological responses to challenging situations.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

The following research objectives were formulated:

- i. To describe the resilience techniques in the books of *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* and *Terusir*.
- ii. To apply a structuralist approach.
- iii. To determine whether novels can help to illustrate resilience strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s many novels were published that have a specific Minangkabau background (Ali, 1994). Often these novels focused on the Minangkabau way of life. The readers got an impression of their customs and the role of the matrilineages. Some of these novels became well-known like *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*, written by Tulis Sutan Sati (1898-1942). This is arguably his most prominent work and inspired students to analyze this work in detail, for example, the thesis of Edrizal (2015).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/resilience>

The book *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* was published by the *Balai Pustaka* and had to follow certain ethical considerations (Erowati & Bahtiar, 2011).

Hamka, Haji Abul Malik Karim Amrullah (1908-1981), was a well-known scholar, and his novels have been studied from many angles. His novel *Terusir* often stood in the shadow of his more widely known works, such as *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van der Wijck* (Hamka, 1984) and *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah* (Hamka, 1999). In *Terusir*, Hamka addresses sensitive issues, including slander (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). Mariah, the main character, stands out because Hamka, as an Islamic scholar, describes her as pessimistic and as a prostitute (Humaira & Surur, 2025). Another important aspect of *Terusir* is how the environment is portrayed. Mariah faces discrimination based on her gender and economic status (Santi & Mustika, 2020). Hamka's depiction of her situation can be seen as a critique of her social position. He also criticizes Minangkabau customs (*adat*), especially from the perspective of men, who hold an insecure role in a matrilineal and matrilocal society in which the husband moves into the wife's house and the children belong to her clan (Stark et al., 2022).

The literature review shows that previous research on the two novels by Tulis Sutan Sati and Hamka has not focused on resilience. However, resilience in literature is an important trait that can appear in characters (Narayan, 2025). Therefore, this study will highlight the resilience strategies of the main characters.

### 3. Research Methods

The researchers used a structuralist approach, which typically involves diachronic and synchronic ways of reading (Stark & Huszka, 2022). In the diachronic method, the text is read from start to finish. The synchronic way involves pausing at a specific point to examine its features. This process often highlights binary oppositions and reveals underlying structures. These features can help us better understand how the writer views certain elements, such as resilience in this case.

A structuralist approach to reading was used by Claude Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss, 1963). It helped, from a comparative perspective, to detect the major differences and similarities. In this article, the researchers intend to examine two Minangkabau authors who published during the same period. The resilience strategies during that time period will be detected and described.

### 4. Results

In this section, the authors focus on the different ways of reading, namely the diachronic and the synchronic way. The binary pairs of oppositions that will be carved out will help to get an understanding of the resilience strategies of the main protagonists.

#### 4.1. An Analysis of *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*

##### 4.1.1. *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat: A Structuralist Way of Reading*

The novel *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* has the following plot:

Midun is a well-mannered young man and lives in a village near the West Sumatran town of Bukittinggi. He is very popular amongst the villagers, and he studies the local form of

martial arts (*pencak silat*) with famous masters like Pendekar Sutan and Haji Abbas. The nephew of the local chief (*Tuanku Laras*) is Kacak. He hates Midun due to his popularity. Certain incidents lead to a deteriorating situation. During a competition of rattan ball kicking, Kacak falls, and the spectators laugh at him. Kacak becomes angry and attacks Midun. However, with no avail.

One day, Kacak is at the market when a chaotic situation arises. The people flee from Pak Inuh, a member of *Tuanku Laras's* family. Pak Inuh is crazy, but he could escape from his home and threatens the people in the market. Midun interferes and fights with Pak Inuh. He wins, but Pak Inuh was slightly injured. The *Tuanku Laras* is upset, and Midun is punished with forced labor for some days.

Another incident occurs when people take a bath in the nearby river. Suddenly, a strong current from upriver appears. One lady was taken away and nearly drowns. Midun rescues her. The lady is Kacak's wife, and he is furious, accusing Midun of behaving inappropriately. Both men fight, and Midun is brought to the *Tuanku Laras*. It was decided that he has to guard the village's security at night for a period of six nights. On the last night, three robbers enter the house of Kacak's wife, and Midun and his friends attack the robbers. During the fight, two robbers were arrested. However, one robber could escape. It is assumed by Haji Abbas that the third robber was probably Kacak due to a sudden injury.

Kacak hires a killer. He should kill Midun. In the location of a famous horse race, the killer attacks Midun, but Maun, Midun's friend, helps him. A huge brawl breaks out, and the police intervenes. Midun and the killer are arrested, and surprisingly, Midun is sentenced to six months in prison. In prison, he faces many difficulties, but he also becomes friends with Turigi, a respected prisoner who helps him. After some time, he helps in cleaning the street of dirt. One day, he finds a valuable necklace and gives it back to its owner, Halimah. They become friends, and Halimah sends him food. Some days later, Midun gets a letter and is informed that Halimah is in danger. After his prison sentence, he meets her, and they manage to get tickets and travel to Betawi (Jakarta). After their arrival, Midun brings Halimah to her father in Bogor, and after a while, he looks for a job in the capital. He takes a loan, but he is cheated. When he refuses to pay the money back, he is sent to prison. While in prison, he spends his time learning to read and write Roman letters. After a while, he is released. One day, he helps the child of a high-ranking Dutch colonial officer. The officer is impressed by his honest and trustworthy attitude. Midun can work for the police and helps to capture drug dealers. Now, Midun has a steady income and can marry Halimah. After some years, he is promoted and even has the opportunity to become a high-ranking officer in Bukittinggi. He does not take revenge against Kacak. However, the government finds out that Kacak had not paid the tax. Therefore, he is captured and deported to the prison in Padang.

The described plot is a diachronic form of reading. In this diachronic way, certain binary pairs of oppositions can be detected (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Binary oppositions in *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*.

No.	Dichotomies	Explanations
1	Good character versus evil character	The main protagonists stand for good traits. However, there are also evil persons. Midun is pious, respects the elders, and this makes him popular, while Kacak is envious, arrogant, and

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		unpopular.
2	Village life versus life in the city	Midun meets other persons who had problems with the abuse of power by local chiefs. Turigi, his friend, even killed a person. On the other hand, life in the city is described as challenging and more competitive.
3	Enemies versus friends	Midun has friends and enemies in the village and in prison. His friends help him. Otherwise, it would be very difficult under such circumstances.
4	Spirituality versus materialistic attitude	Midun is interested in acquiring knowledge. Kacak is selfish and misused his position.

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The dichotomies outlined in Table 1 identify features related to resilience.

#### 4.1.2. The Resilience Strategies of Midun

Midun, the main character in *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*, uses resilience strategies that recent scientific research also describes. These include the following:

a) Social network: Midun has to live in different geographical regions, amongst them are Bukittinggi, Padang, Bogor, and Jakarta. In all of these places, he is surrounded by people who support him. A good example is Maun, his close friend in the village, who even helps him during the fights with his enemy Kacak. The social network comprises friends and family. In the field of science, social contacts play an essential role in producing the hormone oxytocin, which has many beneficial functions:

In summary, we know that oxytocin is released during social situations where it appears to facilitate interpretation of social signals, enhance recognition, increase feelings of affiliation, and promote social connection. Oxytocin's actions in reducing amygdala activation may help to explain why positive support from others can reduce stress [...] (Southwick et al. 2023, p. 120)

The friends helped Midun in difficult situations. The higher authorities, such as the *Tuanku Laras*, were reluctant to punish Midun, as they knew this could lead to unrest.

b) Religion: Midun is a deeply religious person with a noble character. Therefore, he is a popular person amongst the villagers. The religious ideals give him a strong foundation to endure hardship. A good example is the following verses of the Qur'an: "Surely with hardship come ease. Surely with (that) hardship comes more ease." (Qur'an 94: 5-6)<sup>2</sup>

In an authentic narration this is also mentioned:

Suhaib reported that Allah's Messenger said:

Strange are the ways of a believer for there is good in every affair of his and this is not the case with anyone else except in the case of a believer

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<sup>2</sup> <https://quran.com/94>

for if he has an occasion to feel delight, he thanks (God), thus there is a good for him in it, and if he gets into trouble and shows resignation (and endures it patiently), there is a good for him in it. (Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2999)<sup>3</sup>

The mentioned religious sources show that in Islam, patience and steadfastness are essential character traits. Midun is an embodiment of such a character and a kind of role model for the village community.

c) Having a role model: Haji Abbas is a very pious and good person who is well-versed, and not everyone gets the opportunity to learn the martial arts form of *pencak silat* with him. The teaching lessons help Midun to face difficult situations. Moreover, Haji Abbas became a kind of mentor and was even respected by high-ranking persons. Haji Abbas also had empathy for Midun's condition. He is a teacher who also gives advice so that Midun can follow it in challenging circumstances:

Not a single benefit comes from boasting about oneself, from wanting to show how clever one is or how much one knows. As long as you don't damage your decency, in conversation or behavior, it is better to be humble. [...] Be brave because you are brave, and be afraid because you are wrong. Admit your mistake if you are indeed at fault. But show courage when it is needed to demonstrate the truth. [...] In all matters one should practice patience. Especially when struck by misfortune, it must be accepted sincerely and wholeheartedly. Yet, when necessary, do not retreat even a single step; that is the mark of a true man. (Sati, 2008, pp. 23-24)

There was more advice given by Haji Abbas. Midun should have a low profile so that he will not be in the center of attention. Nonetheless, he should protect the truth.

## 4.2. An Analysis of *Terusir*

### 4.2.1. *Terusir: A Structuralist Way of Reading*

*Terusir* is a novel that was written by Hamka. The plot of the story is as follows:

Mariah is Azhar's wife. However, their family background is very different. Azhar has a more noble family background than Mariah's. Therefore, the family of Azhar does not like her, and they create a situation in which one family member enters Mariah's house. When Azhar sees that his wife is with another man, he becomes angry and expels her. Mariah has no place to go. She goes to the house of a friend of his father, but his wife is jealous, so Mariah has to look for a job and finds work as a housemaid for a Dutch family. She also follows the family to the island of Java when the family had to move. However, one day, the family has to return to the Netherlands. Mariah has no one. So, she agrees to marry Yasin, who also worked for the Dutch family. However, he is an evil person. He takes her gold and spends the money on prostitutes. The situation worsens, and Mariah becomes a prostitute herself. Mariah has

<sup>3</sup> <https://sunnah.com/muslim/55>

no religious knowledge and also starts to drink alcohol in order to cope with the situation. She uses a new name, “Neng Sitti”.

Meanwhile, Sofyan, Mariah's son, becomes a successful lawyer and intends to marry Emi. However, another man, named Wirja, also loves her. He tries to use many bad ways to disturb the relationship between Emi and Sofyan, but without success. Neng Sitti hears about the evil plans and confronts Wirja. She tells him that she is the mother of Sofyan. When Wirja hears this, he wants to make this public. A fight erupts. Wirja fell into a knife that was in the hands of Neng Sitti. He dies, and Neng Sitti is arrested. Sofyan becomes her lawyer. The process begins, and Neng Sitti tells her story without revealing that she protected Sofyan. Nonetheless, Sofyan makes a good statement. After Neng Sitti kissed the forehead of Sofyan, she dies. After some months, Sofyan is called to his father due to a serious illness. He tells Sofyan the truth that he had expelled his wife. After his confession, he dies.

In Hamka’s novel, some binary pairs of opposition can be detected (Table 2).

Table 2: The Dichotomies in *Terusir*.

No.	Dichotomies	Explanations
1	Good versus evil persons	There are characters that are evil and selfish, like Wirja. He tries to destroy Sofyan's life. On the other hand, there are people who are good and try to help, like Abdul Halim.
2	Rich versus poor	The family of Azhar is rich, while the family of Mariah is poor. The way of life for the poor people is difficult.
3	Male versus female	Mariah is a woman. She cannot survive without the help of others. Therefore, she is forced to marry Yasin.

In Table 2, it becomes obvious that social criteria play an important role, namely the social situation and gender-specific components. To cope with difficult situations, the social environment also has to ‘change.’

#### 4.2.2. The Resilience Strategies of Mariah

Mariah, the main character in the novel *Terusir*, is quite different than Midun. She has no religious background, and therefore, she has to focus on other strategies in order to cope with her situation. She has only one major strategy, which could be called cognitive and emotional flexibility. Southwick et al. (2023) highlight several essential points about this type of strategy. Some of these points were considered by her. The first point is acceptance. A person must accept the situation. By doing that, the person does not waste energy on something else. Mariah, for example, stopped writing letters to her former husband, Azhar. He did not reply, and so she stopped writing letters. The second point is to focus on the given situation and plan for the future. In Mariah's case, she had to look for a place to work. She tried her best, but unfortunately, she had to face more severe challenges. Thirdly, it is to give something good back and help. In Mariah’s case, it meant that she tried her best so that Sofyan could continue his life undisturbed without trouble.

### 4.3. Major Differences

The main difference between the two main characters is their gender. Mariah is a woman, while Midun is a man. Both have to behave in a different way. In the ideal of society, women are expected to behave properly. Mariah is actually a respected woman until she became the victim of slander. She tried her best, but she was the victim of the circumstances. Therefore, it is not surprising that their strategies for resilience differ. Midun could engage in many social activities. So, he has many friends. The situation of Mariah is different. She was a housewife and inexperienced in earning income. Consequently, she accepted the marriage proposal of Yasin, as for her, this was probably the easiest way to cope with the situation. Furthermore, the gender difference is interesting if we look at the Minangkabau society. Both novels describe features of the Minangkabau culture. Midun, for instance, lives in a typical village. He is a man. The men usually reside in the land of their wives. This means the culture is matrilineal. In a traditional understanding, the young boys had to leave the house and stay in the public prayer house (*surau*) (Radjab, 1995). The young men learn to survive, and it is also a common feature to leave the village and look for ways to trade. This cultural element is called *merantau* (Kato, 1982; Naim, 1985). On the other hand, the women usually stay in houses built on the land of the matrilineage. They have to take care of the communal property. So, it is possible to understand that Midun and Mariah used different strategies due to the conditions within society. Furthermore, it must be added that the frame of education played an important role, too. Only a few women from privileged families had the opportunity to attend schools. Mariah does not have many opportunities to find a suitable job. On the other hand, Midun began to learn the Roman alphabet during his prison sentence. So, it can be concluded that education is one important element in developing resilience strategies.

### 4.4. Common Features

Both novels have some common features. Resilience can be analyzed by looking at its main features and factors (Fröhlich-Gildhoff & Rönnau-Böse, 2024). The duration and the type of stress factors play an important role. If we look at the types of these factors in relation to the two main protagonists, we see similarities. Both characters have to live in conditions that are despised by society. Midun became a prisoner, and Mariah a prostitute. A second stressor is the quantity. Both protagonists have to endure extreme situations. Finally, the time period of such stressful situations can be taken into account. For both figures, it is long. However, with one major difference: Midun has phases of 'recovery'. He can be with his friends or family, but for Mariah, there is no such thing as a recovery period.

Tulis Sutan Sati and Hamka thematize the topic of suffering and being confronted with difficult situations. Interestingly, both authors make comments within the novel. Tulis Sutan Sati writes:

*Despite whatever happened to him, Midun never gave up, because he understood that every misfortune has its purpose, and that adversity often brings blessings. His faith was strong, and he never lost his mind, despite the successive disasters that befell him. Because of his unwavering hope, he always committed himself to improving his fate. (Sati, 2008, p. 208)*

Tulis Sutan Sati stresses that faith is an essential feature in facing difficulties. Moreover, Midun, as a pious person, never loses hope, and this attitude helped him to overcome the critical situations. Hamka also gave a comment about life in general:

*However, there are also creatures who are born in misery, but it is just like a dream. For a moment, like a bird, it lands, then comes a joy, after which it flies away, flies forever, never to land again, until the next time comes, a time of justice and peace, namely death. (Hamka, 2016, p. 36)*

Hamka stresses the transitoriness of happiness. Life itself is not forever. Only after death will there be justice. Hamka was a famous Islamic scholar (Hashim, 2010). He knew that there was injustice. In his novel, Mariah is slandered and suffers. It is noteworthy that Hamka emphasizes the deteriorating condition of the Muslim community. It is characterized as immoral and cruel. Only a few people are willing to help or use their minds, like Abdul Halim, the friend of Azhar. Hamka criticizes a selfish society that seems to have no values anymore. This criticism is interesting as Hamka describes Mariah as a person who suffers from the declining of moral values. The young generation does not ponder about hardship:

*Youth is a fortunate time because young people do not yet know how difficult the life ahead will be. And indeed, they do not yet need to know it, because if they knew it too soon, then in their youth they would already become people who only sit and worry constantly (a person lost in thought). (Hamka, 2016, p. 46)*

Another common feature of both novels is slander. Both Mariah and Midun were wrongly accused of committing an evil act that they did not commit. Neither Midun nor Mariah revolts against the slander. They do not seek revenge, but they accept the situation, even though they have to suffer. By acting this way, they prevent the situation from worsening.

#### 4.5. Discussion

The two novels mentioned show that the main protagonists faced difficult, stressful events. It also became clear that there are culture-specific features. The two main persons are Minangkabau. Within Minangkabau society, certain features can help prevent stressful situations (Stark et al., 2025). However, both authors, Hamka and Tulis Sutan Sati, emphasize that within society, there are greedy and selfish people who pursue only their own interests. They could even use traditional values to enrich themselves. A good example was mentioned in *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*: After Midun's father died, the nephews insisted on their rights to inherit the property. A dispute between both family sides appeared. However, the nephews succeeded, and Midun's sister and brother had to leave the house. Therefore, the traditional way of settling land conflicts has limits (Stark, 2014).

The two novels also feature non-Western concepts of resilience. The Minangkabau society stresses a communal way of living. There are sayings that are widespread in society. A good example is the following saying:

*Barek samo dipikua, ringo samo dijinjiang. [If it is heavy, (we) carry it together on (our) shoulders; (if it is) light, (we) carry it together in (our) hands]. (Stark et al., 2025, p.6)*

In a communal environment, it is easier to solve the problems together. Midun could rely on his friends and teachers. The above-mentioned saying is well-known and might help in a difficult situation. However, not everyone has a broad knowledge, as we see in Mariah's character. She has accepted that she might not be able to change her fate, but an important feature of resilience is that she defines herself not only in her own way but also in her role as a mother. She is proud that her son became a successful lawyer, and this success story has made her more resilient. Such an inner understanding differs from a Western concept that is more self-centered.

For the readers, there are some consequences. If they face difficulties and hardship, they can rely on self-help books and learn resilience strategies. However, in this article, it was shown that even the literary genre offers the opportunity to ponder about the main characters. Both authors, Tulis Sutan Sati and Hamka, wanted to educate the readers. They showed that problems and stressful situations are part of life and that they will end. In the case of *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*, the difficult situation ended during his lifetime, and Midun could live happily. In the case of *Terusir*, the reader sees probably the worst-case scenario. Mariah has to suffer until she dies. But for Hamka, the Islamic values are essential: Life in this world is only short and will not end with death, as there is a life after death.

## 5. Conclusion

This article examines how the main characters in *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* and *Terusir* show resilience when facing difficult situations. Using a structuralist and comparative approach, the researchers identified different strategies. Midun, who is popular and has many friends, copes with challenges in his own way. In contrast, Mariah deals with hardship by focusing on her son's career success, which gives her strength. This approach to resilience goes beyond typical Western ideas and suggests that *Terusir* offers another perspective.

Further research could look into other novels. This approach would be useful to detect what kind of resilience strategies are used. A very significant way would be to look at the culture-specific peculiarities. This is important as non-Western resilience strategies can provide new ideas.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study utilized publicly available historical archival data and published biographies. As this research did not involve human participants or private identifiable information, ethical approval was not required.

## Acknowledgement

N/A

## Funding

This study received no funding.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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