

# **Social Perspective of Kristeva's Abjection: Representation of Dehumanization in the Film Design of Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This analysis aims to explore the concept of social design through the lens of the theory of abjection proposed by Julia Kristeva, by highlighting its application in the representation of dehumanization in the science fiction film Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes. This film is chosen because it represents conflict and warfare among humans as well as post-humans within a complex narrative framework, thereby enabling a critical reading of the construction of identity, the boundaries of humanity, and mechanisms of social exclusion. Through this approach, the research seeks to examine how visual media not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes collective perceptions of "the Other," alienation, and hierarchies of humanity. By integrating the theoretical framework of abjection with visual and semiotic analysis, this study highlights how design elements such as characters, mise-en-scène, and visual composition function in producing dehumanization effects while simultaneously opening spaces for empathy. Furthermore, this research aims to identify the implications of these representations on the audience's social awareness. This study is expected to contribute conceptually to the understanding of the role of social design

in shaping cultural discourse, as well as its potential as a reflective and transformational instrument in promoting more inclusive social change.

**Keywords: Abjection; Dehumanization; Social Design; The Other; Film Design**

## INTRODUCTION

Conflict and war have been inseparable elements of human history, reflecting various social, political, and economic tensions within society (Said, 2011). In today's world, we witness various ongoing conflicts, such as wars in the Middle East, tensions between the United States and Iran, Israel and Palestine, the conflict between North Korea and South Korea, as well as ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. The main causes of these conflicts often involve differences in political ideologies, such as capitalism versus communism, religious differences, and struggles over power and limited natural resources. Various human ideologies drive the occurrence of war and conflict. Extreme nationalism, imperialism, and religious fanaticism often become the main triggers of major conflicts. For example, World War II was triggered by imperial expansion and Nazi racist ideology, while modern conflicts such as in Syria often involve power struggles among different religious and political groups.

In media, many films have depicted the reality of war based on true stories, such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *Black Hawk Down* (2001). *Saving Private Ryan* portrays the Normandy invasion during World War II, highlighting the brutality and sacrifices on the battlefield. *Schindler's List* depicts the Holocaust and Oskar Schindler's efforts to save Jews from Nazi extermination. *Black Hawk Down* portrays the battle in Mogadishu, Somalia, illustrating the chaos and destruction caused by armed conflict. The film *Capernaum* (2018) depicts the human side of the consequences of war and conflict, following the story of a young boy in Beirut living in poverty and suffering due to harsh social conditions. This film shows the profound impact of conflict on individuals, especially children, and invites audiences to reflect on troubling social conditions. Other films that also portray the human side of war include *The Pianist* (2002), which depicts the struggle of a Jewish musician during the Holocaust, and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), which tells the story of a hotel manager saving thousands of refugees during the Rwandan genocide. *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) is an animated film that portrays two orphaned children struggling to survive during the bombing in Japan during World War II, showing the horrors of war from a child's perspective. Such films illustrate how war deeply affects human life through the visualization of cruelty and suffering (Arnheim, 1974).

In science fiction cinema, themes of conflict and war are also frequently explored to reflect this reality, but are often conveyed through symbolism to make them more subtle and acceptable to audiences. For example, films such as *Atlas* (2024), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *The Terminator* (1984–2019), and *Ex Machina* (2014), among many others, explore conflicts between humans and, in other cases, against Artificial

Intelligence that resembles or seeks to become human, as this technology is designed by humans to replace or even surpass them with all their strengths and weaknesses. This reflects fears of increasingly advanced and autonomous technology and often shows that humans themselves create the root of these conflicts through greed and selfishness, ultimately becoming the source of wars driven by competing interests.

Films such as *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron depict conflict between humans and indigenous people on the planet Pandora. In this story, humans are portrayed as invaders who destroy the environment and local culture for economic gain, demonstrating how human greed and selfishness can destroy harmony and peace (Cameron, 2009). The anime series *Pluto* (2023) highlights a similar theme by portraying robots as more humane than humans, criticizing human inhumanity and showing how human-created technology can become more ethical than its creators. The video game adaptation series *Fallout* (2024) depicts a post-apocalyptic world where ongoing conflicts occur among surviving human groups. The destruction caused by nuclear war in *Fallout* criticizes humanity's inability to learn from past mistakes, showing that greed and egoism continue to be the main causes of conflict. In films such as *Dune* (2021–2024) and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024), war and conflict are depicted as inseparable parts of human civilization, suggesting that war will never end due to the persistent desire for power, ideological justification, and domination over religion and natural resources.

From various representations of war-themed films rooted in ideological conflict, whether political, racial, or power struggles, even when packaged within science fiction, a pattern can be identified: visual narratives often reflect internal conflicts within humanity itself, particularly concerning domination, identity, and moral legitimacy. The antagonistic relationships constructed in these narratives mirror historical dynamics in which “the other” is constructed as a threat to legitimize domination, demonstrating that external conflict is essentially a projection of internal conflict in the development of human civilization. Based on this perspective, this research establishes a science fiction film as a relevant case study. The conflict between humans and “others” does not merely represent interspecies opposition, but can be read as an allegory of the evolution of human intellectuality, where rationality, language, and social structures become instruments of power that simultaneously produce subordination and dehumanization. The conflict between humans and the “other” reflects internal conflicts within the evolution of human intellectuality itself.

Based on this allegory, dehumanization can be identified as the main analytical benchmark in examining conflict representation in film, as this concept directly indicates the extent to which a group is positioned outside the boundaries of humanity. Dehumanization becomes a crucial analytical parameter because it not only represents the outcome of ideological conflict but also functions as a mechanism that enables such conflict to occur and escalate. In film narratives, processes of identity reduction such as the loss of language, rationality, and social position demonstrate how humanity can be negated through symbolic construction and power relations. Dehumanization is relevant as a benchmark because it reveals how structures of

domination operate through visual representation. By using dehumanization as the foundation of analysis, this research can identify the ideological mechanisms underlying conflict and assess their impact on perceptions of identity, empathy, and the boundaries of humanity within the context of visual culture.

*Planet of the Apes* is a film series depicting a world where apes have evolved and assumed dominance over humans, creating complex dynamics that can be analyzed through the lens of abjection. Specifically, this study focuses on its latest installment, *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*. The film is directed by Wes Ball and produced by 20th Century Studios. The franchise began with *Planet of the Apes*, adapted from a novel by Pierre Boulle. It has since expanded into films, television series, comics, and other media. The recent reboot trilogy, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, and *War for the Planet of the Apes*, received widespread acclaim. *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes* (figure 1) continues this narrative, set in a future where evolved chimpanzees attempt to build a new civilization after the collapse of human society. Owen Teague plays the main character, alongside Freya Allan, Peter Macon, and Kevin Durand. The story follows Noa, a young ape hunter, who becomes involved in a conflict against Proximus Caesar, a tyrant seeking access to human technology, while collaborating with a human named Mae. The film explores themes of abjection and dehumanization, particularly through interspecies relations and the rediscovery of human artifacts, ending with an ambiguous hope for coexistence.

The representation of dehumanization in this film is framed through Kristeva's theory of abjection, offering a new way to understand how visual narratives create discomfort toward "others." Through symbolism, the film invites reflection on human selfishness and greed as roots of conflict. This study applies abjection theory to analyze how narrative and visual elements represent conflict and dehumanization, as well as their impact on social perception and identity (Kristeva, 1982). This study will also examine how social design can be used as a tool for positive social change, leading to a better understanding of social life.



Figure 1. Poster Campaign of Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes. (Source: Jones, 2024)

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Dehumanization is a process in which individuals or groups are treated or perceived as lacking human qualities, including a harmful psychological process in which certain social groups are represented through language that diminishes their humanity, triggering bias, hate speech, and potential violence (Mendelsohn, 2020). This can reduce the human qualities of a group and is difficult to detect computationally due to its subtle nature and model bias toward certain groups (Zhang, 2024). This mental process enables exclusion and inhumane treatment, which can be analyzed through patterns of language in political and media discourse (Engelmann, 2024). This broad and layered psychological process from subtle to extreme forms has significant impacts on social life and mental health, as it reduces empathy, increases violence, and reinforces exclusion (Haslam, 2024). In social psychology, dehumanization is understood as a mechanism that allows individuals or groups to commit violence without guilt because victims are no longer seen as equal humans (Smith, 2011; Haslam, 2006). It often involves stripping individuals or groups of dignity and human value, treating them as objects or animals. Dehumanization typically occurs in contexts of conflict, oppression, and violence, where one group seeks to dominate or destroy another. It often appears in two main forms, animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization, both involving the loss of human characteristics. In social and political conflict, collective violence can occur when individuals deny the humanity of others, remove moral restraint, and obscure personal responsibility (Kelman, 1973). Totalitarian regimes systematically use dehumanization to strip individuals of their rights, particularly in the context of the Holocaust (Arendt, 1973). Dehumanization is also a key mechanism in moral disengagement, a psychological process that allows individuals to commit immoral acts without feeling guilt (Bandura, 1999).

Dehumanization can be understood from various theoretical perspectives, including social psychology, philosophy, and sociology. In social psychology, it is often studied to understand how individuals or groups can commit cruelty against others, as demonstrated in classic experiments such as the Stanford Prison Experiment by Philip Zimbardo and the Obedience Experiment by Stanley Milgram. In philosophy and ethics, dehumanization is linked to discussions of morality, justice, and human rights, with philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas emphasizing the importance of recognizing the humanity of others as the basis of ethics. From a sociological and anthropological perspective, dehumanization is seen as a structural process in which social and cultural institutions shape dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors, often involving stereotypes, prejudice, and systemic discrimination. Historical and cultural examples include the Holocaust, slavery in the United States, and the Rwandan genocide, all of which demonstrate extreme forms of dehumanization. Therefore, dehumanization can be concluded as a complex process involving the denial of dignity and human value, and understanding it through multiple disciplines helps identify early signs and prevent future atrocities. Julia Kristeva is a French philosopher, psychoanalyst, novelist, and cultural theorist. Born on June 24, 1941, in Sliven, Bulgaria, Kristeva moved to Paris in the mid-1960s and became one of the leading

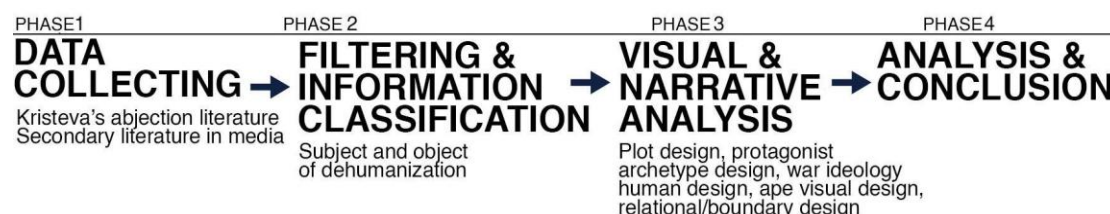
thinkers in the fields of semiotics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and literary theory. She earned her doctoral degree in linguistics from the University of Paris in 1973 with a dissertation titled *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Revolution in Poetic Language). She later became a professor at Paris VII–Denis Diderot University, where she taught linguistics and gender studies. In addition to teaching, Kristeva also practiced as a psychoanalyst. She is widely recognized for her contributions to literary theory and structural linguistics, as well as for her innovative ideas on identity, language, and subjectivity. Some of her most influential works include *Séméiotikè* (1969), which examines theories of signs and semiosis across cultural and linguistic contexts; *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), which analyzes the concept of abjection and its role in shaping identity and culture; and *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), which combines psychoanalysis with literary studies to examine melancholy and depression. Kristeva is also known as a novelist, with works such as *The Old Man and the Wolves* and *Possessions*, which reflect her theoretical concerns.

The theory of abjection is one of the key concepts in Kristeva's thought. Abjection is a psychological condition related to an individual's experience of something that lies outside the normal boundaries of identity and social order. It refers to feelings of disgust or rejection toward something that threatens one's identity or sense of purity. It is a response to something that does not conform to the symbolic or social order and is often associated with liminal or ambivalent phenomena. A classic example of the abject is the dead body or bodily fluids such as blood and excrement, which remind us of the boundaries between life and death. As a psychological process, abjection describes how individuals expel or reject certain aspects of themselves or their bodies in order to form identity. It is an effort to separate oneself from what is considered impure or undesirable. In terms of identity, abjection helps shape the individual by defining what is "not allowed" or "not acceptable" within society. In this sense, it functions as a mechanism for maintaining symbolic order and social structure. Kristeva applies the theory of abjection in cultural, literary, and artistic analysis. In literature and film, abjection often appears through disturbing, grotesque, or horrific themes that compel audiences to confront the limits of identity and social norms. For example, in horror films, monstrous creatures or grotesque scenes often embody abjection, where viewers experience a simultaneous sense of fear and attraction toward something that exists beyond normal boundaries. From the perspective of Kristeva's theory of abjection, *Planet of the Apes* can be analyzed as a representation of abjection, particularly in the transformation and relationship between apes and humans. Let us further explain how this can be connected to the concept of abjection.

## METHODOLOGY

This research (Figure 2) uses a literature review method to put Kristeva's Abjection theory into the context of analyzing the scenes on *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*. The first stage of this method is the comprehensive collection of research data. This initial step involves searching for and gathering relevant literature, including books, journal articles, and Kristeva's writings related to the theory of abjection. Furthermore, the study also includes a critical analysis of secondary literature that discusses the application of abjection theory in film and media studies. After the data are collected,

the next stage is the filtering and classification of information to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the sources. In the analysis stage, the selected literature is examined in depth to understand the key concepts of abjection theory, such as the identification of the abject, the roles of subject and object, and the process of dehumanization. Subsequently, these concepts are applied in the narrative and visual analysis of the film *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*.



**Figure 2. Stages of the Analysis Method. (2025)**

The research focuses on how characters and narrative structures in the film represent themes of abjection and dehumanization, with particular emphasis on how beings considered as “the Other” or “non-human” are treated. The final stage involves the compilation of the study derived from this literature analysis. This study summarizes the main findings, connects theoretical concepts with empirical observations from the film, and situates the results within a broader context of film studies and critical theory. This research not only strengthens the understanding of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection but also provides new insights into the representation of dehumanization in contemporary cinema, particularly in *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*. The resulting study is expected to contribute significantly to academic discussions on dehumanization and abjection in visual media.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Several analytical findings that can be examined as the boundaries of abjection and dehumanization in Table 1 are as follows:

**Table 1 Analysis Table. (2025)**

| Narrative & Visual Elements | Constructed Narrative                            | Symbolic Meaning                                                              | Abjection Findings                                                                                               | Analysis                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Plot Design                 | Intellectual evolution of apes into humans       | Ambivalence of human and ape identity                                         | Rejection (abjection) occurs because apes attempt to surpass the boundaries of humanity                          | Abjection can occur due to ontological instability, where intellectual evolution blurs the boundary between humans and apes    |
| Protagonist Archetype       | Ape design with human-like features              | The hierarchy of the protagonist (the “righteous” figure) is not always human | Human behavior in an ape form creates a grotesque effect (abjection)                                             | Abjection emerges as the traditional protagonist archetype is replaced by apes, disrupting the identificatory subject position |
| War Ideology                | The threat of animal evolution surpassing humans | Humans are no longer superior over nature                                     | Rejection (abjection) occurs based on hierarchical distinctions between superior and inferior species within the | Abjection operates when the structure of life is threatened and symbolic exclusion mechanisms take place                       |

| order of life                |                                                     |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Human Design                 | Humans become oppressed victims                     | Humans themselves are the cause                                                                                                       | Rejection (abjection) toward ape society occurs because humans are positioned as victims   | Similar to the war ideology narrative, abjection is an inversion of subject-object positions resulting from resistance due to being "colonized"                          |
| Ape Visual Design            | Humanoid / Anthropomorphic                          | The value of life and intellectual essence is not always represented by ideal beauty; apes appear more "human" than humans themselves | Superficial abjection toward the non-human appearance of apes                              | Abjection emerges because the most empathetic figure is not human, existing within visual liminality, an overlap between similarity and difference between ape and human |
| Relational / Boundary Design | Equal intellectual capacity between humans and apes | Identity ambiguity                                                                                                                    | Mutual abjection between humans and apes results in the dissolution of symbolic categories | As reflected in the narrative structure, boundaries become blurred, yet both continue to reject each other (abjection) due to their historical relations                 |

### *Plot Design: Ape-to-Human Transformation, Identity Ambivalence*

Apes that evolve and develop abilities typically associated with humans such as speech, logical thinking, and the formation of complex societies, create identity ambivalence. These apes exist between the categories of animal and human, generating discomfort and rejection (abjection) within humans because they challenge the boundaries of human identity. In this context, the transformation or evolution of apes itself symbolizes the development of human thought. The blurring of boundaries between animal and human produces abjection by threatening the symbolic order that positions humans as superior entities. This condition distorts the limits of human identity, resembling a process of dehumanization in which humans degrade or alienate other beings to maintain dominance over apes. Abjection emerges through ontological instability, where apes can no longer be definitively categorized as either "animal" or "human." This transformation disrupts the symbolic boundaries that have sustained human identity as superior. Within Kristeva's framework, this condition provokes rejection because the subject is confronted with something that threatens the integrity of its identity namely, the possibility that the "non-human" may in fact reflect the essence of humanity itself.

### *Apes as Protagonist Archetype Design*

The visual design of apes, which incorporates human-like features (such as facial expressions, movement, and body language) while retaining animal characteristics (fur, posture, etc.), produces a grotesque effect. This evokes ambivalence and a sense of abjection, as the entity is neither fully human nor fully animal, replacing the traditionally human archetype of the protagonist in this genre. These human-like apes challenge the conventional hierarchy of human protagonists, despite being positioned as the central characters in the narrative. The grotesque visuality generates abjection

because the entity does not fully conform to either human or animal categories, thereby exceeding the traditional concept of a protagonist as a representation of humanity. Abjection operates through the disruption of the identificatory subject position: the audience is compelled to empathize with a figure that is neither visually nor ontologically fully human. This tension produces affective ambivalence, where the ape becomes both a center of empathy and a source of discomfort. Thus, abjection manifests as a crisis in identification, in which the subject can no longer stabilize the question of "who qualifies as human."

### *Ideological War Narrative Design*

Within the narrative, humans positioned as subjugated by apes are constructed as the "other" or marginalized subjects. Apes perceive humans as a threat to their new social order, reflecting how abjection functions within societies to preserve dominant group identity by rejecting and excluding what is deemed incompatible. In this world, ape dominance reflects dehumanization, as the ruling group defines norms and eliminates difference. Abjection becomes evident in the way humans are framed as threats to systemic stability. In the ideological conflict between humans and apes, abjection emerges as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion. As the dominant group, apes affirm their collective identity by rejecting humans as disruptive entities. This process demonstrates that abjection is not merely an emotional response, but also an ideological strategy to maintain power through the construction of what is considered "unacceptable to exist."

### *Plot Design: Humans as Victims*

Humans in the film frequently feel threatened by the existence of evolved apes. This reflects Kristeva's concept of abjection, where something that challenges the symbolic order (in this case, the distinction between human and animal) provokes both disgust and rejection, alongside a simultaneous attraction to what is strange and different. This condition reflects abjection toward something that is both foreign and familiar (the uncanny). It also involves a reversal of dehumanization, where humans are positioned as inferior subjects within a new power hierarchy. Abjection manifests through the inversion of subject-object relations, in which humans typically the center of humanity, experience a degradation of status. When humans are reduced to inferior entities, the uncanny emerges: something familiar (humanity) becomes strange. This produces psychological tension, as the subject is forced to confront the potential loss of its own ontological status.

### *Visual Design of Apes*

The visual design of apes (Figure 3) in *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes* is explicitly constructed to emphasize strong humanoid elements through advanced technologies such as facial stereo cameras and Unreal Engine. Ape characters are created using 3D facial imaging technology, enabling highly realistic emotional expressions that mirror human affect. This is evident, for instance, in scenes where the character Noa discovers his father, displaying profound emotion through detailed eye movement and facial expression. These technologies grant apes anthropomorphic qualities that bring them closer to humans, while still retaining primate physical characteristics. In this way, the design invites analysis through abjection and dehumanization, as viewers experience discomfort from the fusion of human and non-human traits.

Dehumanization appears in narrative conflicts where humans and apes confront one another, reflecting how apes though more “human-like” can mirror the brutality or predatory tendencies of humans themselves. Visually, environmental motifs of nature reclaiming human spaces reinforce the narrative that apes are more harmoniously integrated with nature, granting them a form of moral superiority. All these elements support the depiction of an existential conflict between humans and apes, reflecting deeper ethical and moral dilemmas at the level of abjection. Abjection arises from the overlap between visual similarity and difference: apes that closely resemble humans in expression, emotion, and gesture yet retain primate features, produce a grotesque effect. Within the logic of abjection, this constitutes visual liminality, something too close to humanity to be dismissed, yet not fully acceptable as human, thereby generating simultaneous empathy and repulsion.



**Figure 3** Compilation of the character Noa. (courtesy 20th Century Studios, 2024)

#### *The Dissolution of Boundaries Between Humans and Apes*

The film frequently portrays the destruction of boundaries between humans and apes, both physically and socially. This reflects the process of abjection, in which something unclear and ambiguous challenges established orders and identities. The collapse of the human–ape boundary symbolizes a threat to the symbolic order that structures human identity. This process embodies abjection through identity confusion and a sense of disgust toward such ambiguity. Abjection operates most intensely at the level of the dissolution of symbolic categories, when the boundary between human and non-human fully collapses. This ambiguity threatens the structure of meaning that has long governed identity, producing a sense of epistemological instability. In Kristeva’s framework, this condition represents the extreme point of abjection, where the subject loses a clear reference to define itself and “the other.”

## **CONCLUSIONS**

*Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes* can be considered a strong example of social abjection in design and visual narrative. The transformation of apes into beings with human-like characteristics creates tension and ambivalence that are characteristic of abjection. Evolved apes become symbols of what cannot be fully accepted by humans, challenging the boundaries of identity and social order, and generating feelings of disgust and rejection, as well as deep fascination. By employing Kristeva’s theory of abjection, we can understand how this film constructs a narrative that invites audiences to confront fear and ambivalence toward the “other” and toward what does not fully conform to familiar categories. The film also presents reversed dehumanization, where humans become the oppressed within a new social hierarchy established by apes. Through grotesque visual design, the film questions power dynamics and explores how human identity is put at stake when the boundary between human and animal is

transgressed (Kristeva, 1982). This representation underscores humanity's existential fear of evolution and the loss of its dominant position, touching on universal themes of power imbalance and uncertainty about the future. Ultimately, the film can be understood as a cultural mirror that highlights identity conflicts in an era of transformation.

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First Author's Contributions include research design, data collection, data analysis, drafting of the manuscript, critical revision, and supervision. Second Author contributed in conceptualization of the study and supporting research design.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

This study ethical approval was not required under institutional guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study did not involve experimental manipulation, sensitive personal data, or clinical procedures beyond minimal-risk academic research.

## GENERATIVE AI DISCLOSURE

Generative AI tools with ChatGPT were used for language editing, grammar refinement, formatting assistance, and limited technical support such combining and separating paragraphs. Authors remain fully responsible for the intellectual content of the manuscript, including conceptual development, theoretical framing, research design, data analysis, interpretation, and conclusions. All substantive academic decisions were made by the authors.

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