

AN INVESTIGATION INTO EMPLOYEE AND ORGANISATIONAL DYNAMICS IN A FLEXIBLE WORK FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The object of this research is to provide a detailed perspective of employee and organisational dynamics in a flexible work practices framework, intra- and post-pandemic. This paper aims to explore the influence of flexible work practices on the employee and the organisation.

The most challenging issues during the intra-Covid-19 pandemic period were individual and organisational adaption to new work practices with the aim of sustaining optimum levels of worker morale and productivity, which became meaningful in the context of the continuation of flexible work in transformed and alternative work settings post-pandemic.

During this research, non-empirical research was conducted in the arrangement of a review utilising existing empirical evidence, which provides for literature of varied methodologies. This resulted in a detailed non-structured analysis of the remote work concept and its diverse employee and organisational inferences.

As a result of the research, it is shown that although improved productivity was regarded as a remote work gain, the merit of employee motivation and job satisfaction is deemed forecasters of prime organisational performance with the consideration that maintaining and supporting an operationally efficient and strengthened organisational work culture should be an organisational aim. In future, a proposed approach of synthesising remote work expertise in policies and syllabi will endorse and sustain the progression of the post-pandemic workplace.

It is therefore suggested that a comprehensive PESTLE analysis be performed by utilising the proposed flexible work five-factor model towards crafting a comprehensive list of influences on employee and organisational remote work dynamics for the success of continued remote work practices.

Keywords: COVID-19, flexible work practices, organisational, post-pandemic, productivity, remote, support, wellbeing, work from home.

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1. Introduction

Much has been contemplated, debated, and written about remote work in the intra-Covid-19 (C-19) and post-C-19 era, and justifiably so as C-19 is deemed the core for experiencing unparalleled work-related transformations globally [1, 2]. In addition to facing unique work-related transformations, C-19 and its consequences is also deemed to have been a world-wide health and societal crisis that commanded operational and direct action by authorities, business entities and individuals [3] and which then subsequently symbolised the dynamic force for the innovation and modernisation of work methods [4]. Terminologies such as work-from-home (WFH), flexible work practices (FWP) and distributed work experienced revitalisation when these measures were implemented to confine and mitigate the spread of C-19 [5], which included quarantines, travel bans and movement restrictions [6]. In the post-pandemic landscape, however, FWP and WFH as work methodology remain in practice and are expected to accelerate [7] as there has been an irrefutable shift in the work landscape. Public and private entities continued to WFH despite the almost total dissipation of working in this manner as a specific measure of containing the C-19 threat. This happened for various reasons, of which

the realisation of the pandemic FWP acquired organisational efficacies, real-time savings and having inherited a much more tech-savvy workforce, are some of the reasons. Several studies were conducted related to remote work or WFH in general [8, 9], which considered various opinions of remote work, ranging from being considered a valuable instrument to decrease overheads and reducing work related absenteeism [10] to presenting opportunities for workers practising work from home and simultaneously having the opportunity to care for their families at home [11]. Therefore, it can be understood that the issue of C-19 in this milieu consequently triggered out-of-norm organisational behavioural and human resource issues [12], and issues such as the influence of perceived organisational support (POS) became meaningful in the context of continued optimum levels of employee morale.

As a result of C-19, how we live and perform our work transformed, and alternative settings have become our new workspaces [13]. These monumental changes and adaption of work processes [14, 15], which included telework and hybrid remote work arrangements, seemed to have developed into the new normal in numerous business entities to effectively sustain operational requirements [16]. The modification of work processes resulted in challenges [4, 17], and organisations and public service entities found themselves facing exceptional conditions while expected to remain productive. The modification to a home-based office with the incorporation of home and work life, the prevalence of social and professional isolation, and longer and differing daily working hours are all factors of the adjusted work life [18] and circumnavigating these revised work methodologies may influence employees in terms of the risks such a working method entails [19].

Consequently, this study evaluated the over-all consensus on the concept of FWP and organisational consequences in a distributed work setting. For the remainder of this paper, the discussion takes place under the following main headings: materials and methods, perspectives and discussion, research implications and perspectives, research limitations, recommendations for further research, and conclusions.

Aim of research was to explore the influence of flexible work practices on the employee and the organisation.

2. Materials and methods

Non-empirical research was conducted through a review of existing empirical evidence, which includes literature on varied methodologies. This is a non-structured analysis with the main intent to evaluate research consensus on individual and organisational dynamics, with a future research agenda, of remote work in a distributed work landscape.

Literature sources were selected within the date range of January 2020 to December 2023 to include literature intra-C-19 and literature during the three-year post-pandemic era. A breakdown of the 92 sources that were studied is detailed in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Literature sources summarised

Source type	Quantity
Journal articles	80
Books	2
Professional websites	4
Reports	3
Conference paper	3

3. Results and discussion

For this section, analysis and discussion take place under the following sub-headings: 1) flexible work and remote work practices; 2) organisational performance 3) organisational support and culture; 4) wellbeing and morale; 5) work-life balance; 6) productivity; 7) communication and the predictors of isolation; and 8) lessons from a crisis and the road ahead.

3. 1. Flexible work and remote work practices

Remote work has become the substitute for what the workforce has historically deemed the primary and conventional organisational-based work methodology [20], during which worker outputs are reached detached from conventional office-based spaces and is this deemed advantageous [21, 22] in effecting savings [23], such as commuting time and leaving more time for work focus [24]. Studies have thus far revealed that working from home or an alternate location can improve work performance [25, 26], that workers opt for organisations offering a remote work option [27] and that this method of working reinforces job autonomy and credit for work outputs for individuals [10]. For a sustained WFH approach, the spotlight will need to be placed on proper infrastructure, especially adequate ICT [25, 23] and ICT support availability [28], as the deficiency in this can lead to the consequence of some entities not being tolerant of this novel work methodology [27].

While scholars mostly agree with each other about the substantial benefits [26, 29] WFH offers, we need to be mindful that the absence of structured remote work policies creates adaptation challenges in this milieu. The absence of structured WFH policies will inadvertently cause an added layer of complexity for supervisors and management cadres to lead and manage remote teams successfully virtually. This will be more so an issue where organisational structures are typically extremely complex and hierarchical in nature, such as with public sector entities. At this point, there is limited empirical evidence to indicate that remote supervision would be similar in nature to in-person supervision. However, the need still exists to effectively lead virtual teams to realise and sustain operational effectiveness and organisational objectives [30]. In a similar vein, the upsurge of remote work offers a significant prospect of scrutinizing the fundamental connection that exists between monitoring and control [31] and the longer-tenure psychosocial influences of these diverse working methods [32].

Since the rapid transition to remote mode did not allow for opportunities to train and familiarise workers with the possible WFH challenges [33, 34], training should be prioritised as it will benefit both workers and management [35]. Therefore, training syllabi and policies should include ICT technical support, working hours, boundary management, task clarity, interaction, and training initiatives [29]. Therefore, the authors of 26 rightfully argue that C-19 has necessitated the synthesising of remote work knowledge, of which the hopeful outcome is efficient remote work policies [29] and syllabi that will endorse and sustain the progression of the new post-pandemic workplace.

3. 2. Organisational performance

Though it is recognised that organisational performance implies the study of an entity's performance against its objectives and aspirations, literature has not been apparent on the findings of intended outputs compared to actual outputs in the remote work setting. Research has, however, found that organisations who employ remote workers have the advantage of efficient supervisory arrangements for enhanced organisational performance [22], and research has also implied that there is an explicit tie connecting organisational performance and employee motivation [36]. On that note, it is understood that employee motivation is essential for organisational advancement and sustainability [36]. This suggests that the significance of the concept of the psychological work environment, which signifies the way, in which workers experience and react in the workplace, could affect the psychosocial work environment [37], albeit in a positive manner with possible elevated levels of wellbeing and a decreased level of psychological distress [38].

In further scrutiny of the link between organisational performance and employee motivation, the changes in work techniques [39] and the value of job satisfaction cannot be disregarded. The authors of 8 note that long-term remote work undermines job satisfaction if there is a lack of an appropriate workspace, an absence of suitable supervising methods and a lack of digital maintenance. Consequently, the requirement to establish support for remote workers could be an elevator of work fulfilment and efficiency [11]. Job satisfaction is understood to be significantly influenced by employee motivation [40]. Harris and colleagues further argue that cultivating harmonious associations between workers and management will establish a comfortable work atmosphere, leading

to increased employee motivation and performance. As organisational outputs depend on worker output, the merit of employee motivation and job satisfaction is deemed a forecaster of prime organisational performance.

3. 3. Organisational support and culture

In the context of a continued remote work setting, maintaining and supporting an operationally efficient and strengthened organisational work culture should be the organisational aim. In this context, organisational culture is conceptualised as the workers' perspective of what provides significance to their work [40]. In similar vein, workers recognise organisational support as support, received from the organisation or entity in the form of caring for workers' welfare as well as gratitude for their contributions [41]. In terms of the relationship between organisational support and culture, it can be understood that once organisational support is deficient, adverse effects related to worker culture, such as decreased worker productivity, will be a consequence [42]. Moreover, then, organisational culture should succour work-life balance [43] in the context of organisational support, which organisational support should ideally be in a mediating position amid a healthy organisational culture and a balanced work-life interchange. From a slightly more theoretical perspective, the authors of 44 argue that the *“prevailing, singular conceptualization of organisational support is misaligned with contemporary perspectives on social exchange has served as the bedrock for organizational support theory since organizational support theory's inception ...”*.

Furthermore, the authors of 44 developed four distinctive types of organisational support: namely 1) teleological, 2) personalized, 3) collectivistic, and 4) monistic. Thereafter, it is illustrated that the features, connected to the various forms of organisational support, are indeed significant contemplations as conceptual alignment in terms of the category of support perceived [44, 45]. With regards to organisational support and the outcomes of performance, a study found that *“work engagement plays a key role in the relationship between role overload and distal outcomes of performance”* [46] and that perceived organisational support alleviates the influence of role burden on work performance.

While FWP literature surely reveals calls for improved support [24, 33] and it is evident that this method of working undoubtedly influences management support approaches [47], and that maintaining consistent communication practices is key to maintaining elevated levels of trust [48]. Moreover, evidence was found that the connection between fulfilment with remote work and isolation was moderated by the perceived support, received from the organisational entity [12].

Perhaps we should accept that organisational culture has been inevitably redefined and reshaped through an evolution into a distributed work milieu [49]. Therefore, management ought to identify and recognise the unique issues employees are battling and then foster an environment for suitable mediation to circumvent an often inadequate one-size-fits-all worker support approach [18].

3. 4. Remote employee's wellbeing and morale

Numerous studies are noted in the literature relating to the relationship between FWP or remote work and employee wellbeing and morale [35, 50–52]. While acclimatising to a changed work landscape during the initial C-19 WFH period, it is accepted that workers were continually concerned about their own and family members' health and well-being [53]. In addition to well-being and health, it is also apparent that psychological health is significant [54] and should not be overlooked in a remote work setting. Our C-19 involvement ought to have caused us to reflect on life quality, general health, and well-being [55]. Therefore, understanding the importance of a holistic outlook on work and personal well-being will, without doubt, contribute to enhanced physical and psychological worker health, as well as have an influence on individual productivity [33]. Regarding the relationship between well-being and stress, it is noted that the *“organizational climate has a negative and significant effect on work stress, which means that a conducive organizational climate will reduce the level of work stress and vice versa”* [56].

C-19 has interrupted the personal and work lives of individuals globally, and negative psychological effects were observed [57]. In a similar vein, some of the major hazards for remote worker health are the potential overwork risk and the psychosocial consequences of remote work [4]. Where worker health is at peril, management should strive to offer emotional support and care to improve worker output and mitigate negating performance [16], and encourage remote work policies, aimed at shielding the well-being of workers [52]. As we have supported apparent and morally sound decision-making during the height of the C-19 pandemic to lower the influence of breakdown and tension [58], we should continue to embrace practices to encourage worker well-being in the post-pandemic era. In parallel tone, regarding worker well-being, the topic of work-life balance and stability is placed under the lens. Numerous scholars share the view that FWP could lessen stress and moderate or enrich work-life disparity [30, 35, 59] and there are scholars who argue that the influence of remote work on work-life balance could be generally negative leading to burnout and stress [1, 59, 60]. It is therefore acknowledged that the lack of an individual capacity to competently balance and accomplish the objectives of work and personal life could lead to a disparity and deterioration in remote work-life balance [61] and even probable work discontent [50]. Consequently, an organisational culture that sustains work-life balance should be considered when rationalising the influence of FWP on work-life balance [43].

3. 5. Productivity

Though improved productivity is cited as a gain of remote work [62, 63], evidence was found that the overall influence on productivity is rather ambiguous when remote work is instituted as compulsory and full time or when external factors come into effect [64]. Notwithstanding, the literature is clear on the fact that this method of working has a substantial influence on workload [65]. There are, however, limits to what remote worker productivity level could improve [66] before issues, such as well-being, burnout and increased stress, must be reflected upon. With that observation, it should be noted that increased well-being was found to moderate stress for full-time remote workers [67]. Self-leadership and self-sufficiency were positively associated with remote productivity and work engagement [68].

As organisational entities mapped the pathway to what work would look like in a post-pandemic era, organisations that have instituted detailed FWP policies have observed a rise in worker well-being and productivity levels [69]. Adapting current policies to suit a remote work mode [27] will increase productivity. There is also a clear affiliation between deep-seated management trust and increased productivity, while flexibility is mediating in this relationship [70]. Employing remote work best practices and policies [14] would be valuable to upholding optimum productivity levels, accomplishing work-life balance, and contributing to holistic worker well-being [14]. Policies and best practices should include workstation ergonomics suitability [34], which is of substantial value for holistic occupational health, and innovative methods to improve the WFH telecommunications infrastructure [71].

3. 6. The lack of in-person communication as a possible predictor of isolation

Pre-pandemic, the conventional assumption was that collaboration and communication are more effectively achieved in person [72]. Then followed the COVID-19 pandemic, and we had to perform our work functions virtually. Hence, the conventional assumption was challenged as the remote work argument is frequently coupled with electronic or virtual communication methods [25] and the challenges it brought about [73], as these communication approaches present the users with some restrictions [28]. Since workers switched to virtual communication, connecting became increasingly challenging [74]. Subsequently, it was believed that the absence of face-to-face communication could be a predictor of professional isolation, nonetheless, *“while remote work frequency contributes to isolation, mediated communication frequency seems to reduce isolation”* [75]. Whereas sustaining informal communication seemed challenging [24], a constructive result of constant organisational communication could suggest that workers could really grasp and understand the value of sharing their emotions [76].

3. 7. Lessons from a crisis and the road ahead

Notwithstanding C-19 being one of the greatest global distressing events we have experienced in numerous generations [77], it has taught us countless lessons [49] and it is vital that we learn the correct lessons [78]. One lesson that we could never disregard is the immense lesson we learned about the importance of organisational agility [79], but this is just one of the numerous post-pandemic issues as researchers have applied substantial energies to study the diverse aspects C-19 brought to the forefront [80]. Research in this phenomenon has indeed increased, for example it is estimated that United Kingdom newspaper editorials, specifically on remote work, increased from 150 per month pre-pandemic to approximately 6,000 per month in the intra-pandemic period [81]. As research indicated predictions that the shift to remote work is likely to continue [82, 83] and that employees perceive remote work as productive due to the saving of daily commuting expenses and energy [84], we should consider ‘now’ a window of opportunity to cautiously evaluate our abilities with the aim to create alternatives for advancement [3].

Thinking towards a post-pandemic epoch and methods to moderate the organisational challenges C-19 brought about is strongly recommended [85], and management should think about retaining best practices going forward [72]. In addition to best practice applications, stakeholders are also utilising managerial, government and votive strategies to focus on the challenges we inherited from C-19 [86]. In terms of sustaining holistic worker health post-pandemic, C-19 had a substantial effect on psychological health [87] and wellbeing [88, 89]. However, the promotion of individuals’ positive resources intra-pandemic and post-pandemic could be a solution to prevent mental distress, adjusting to a reformed setting and to safeguard well-being [90]. A major adjustment was moving from in-person to virtual, and the velocity, with which virtual conversion has followed, is indeed a remarkable demonstration of worker adaptability [91, 92]. Notwithstanding, facilitating additional connection opportunities for workers would also combat professional isolation. In terms of future work methods, literature indicates a preference for a hybrid model [48], which would mean increased opportunities for face-to-face connect sessions.

Research, performed during C-19 and the immediate post-C19 period, attempted to hypothesise the boundaries of teleworking. Pre-C-19, as far back as 1997, the authors of 91 conceptualised teleworking in the four factors of the Teleworking framework where they argue that individual, organisational, work and home or family factors are interconnected and combined into the telework working outlook as seen in Fig. 1.

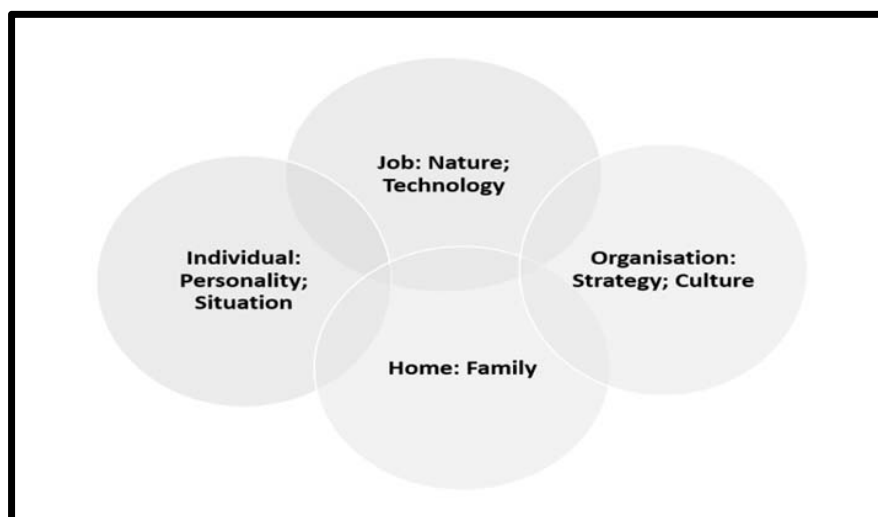


Fig. 1. The Four Factors of Teleworking Framework

Source: Baruch and Nicholson, 1997

Moreover, in 2001, it was argued that it would be “*unlikely that teleworking would reach a very high level of application in the foreseeable future*” [93] as a pandemic and the monumental

move to remote work was not deemed a probability. With remote work in the limelight when millions of workers globally commenced remote work in 2020, the authors of 94 proposed an extension to the four factors of the teleworking framework by proposing a fifth factor to the framework. As displayed in **Fig. 2**, the ‘external forces’ construct was added to the framework, which should be conceptualised in the context of a PESTLE framework.

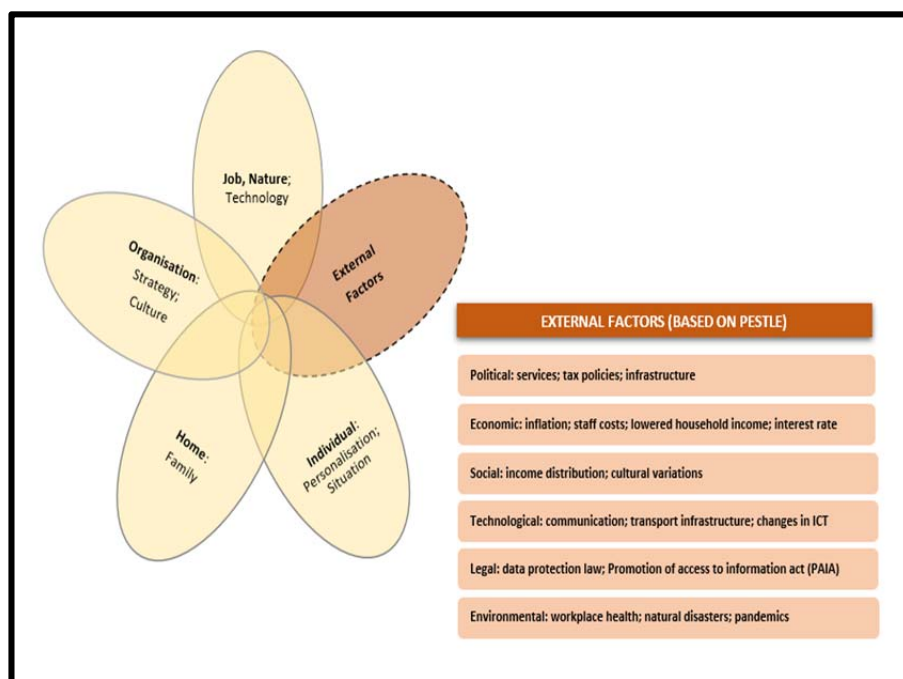


Fig. 2. The Flexible Work Five Factor Model

Source: Van Heerden & Naicker, 2022

The PESTLE framework categorises external influences into six main types: political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental. Historically, the PESTLE technique is an instrument to consider macro-influences that could impact business approaches, and consists of six groups of factors that could influence business approaches, namely, political, economic, sociocultural, technological, legal and environmental. The PESTLE method can be utilised to uncover prospective concerns that could have a key influence on the future of an endeavour [94, 95], this tool assists organisations in focusing on significant factors for business growth [96], and the influence of the PESTLE factors provides for a meaningful contribution to manage expenditure, alleviate risks and to attain a competitive advantage [97]. It is therefore argued that various factors in each of these groupings could influence telework and could add value if a comprehensive PESTLE analysis could be performed to provide a comprehensive list of influences on the success of continued remote work practices.

Research limitations. This paper is a good source of material for researchers and provides various insights. Since the inception of C-19, remote work ‘permanency’ has become a reality for a vast number of workers, and therefore ‘good quality’ evidence is lacking in some of the intricate FWP domains, such as the various influences of remote work and organisational response, culture, and support in this domain. With this study, a determined effort was therefore made to inform the reader efficiently and methodically on the research phenomenon while steering away from subjectivity. This research study has a limited date range for the inclusion of literature, which includes only 4 years from January 2020 to December 2023, which might indicate an exclusion of meaningful earlier literature contributions. Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, this review was performed after investigating 92 different sources. It will be able to provide a balanced picture of the evolution of WFH organisational and individual dynamics, as well as serve the purpose of recommending future research initiatives.

Recommendations for further research. Considering the increased remote work dimensions, increasing the body of academic studies to synthesise FWP knowledge is required to re-conceptualize telework boundaries in the context of organisational performance and organisational culture. As we accept that employees have somewhat adapted to remote work at this point, the lens must be fitted and adjusted into other areas of mostly human resource-affiliated themes for further research, such as WFH leadership and management dimensions. Since we realise and accept that WFH cannot be executed as a one-size-fit-all approach, business entities are now exploring future working directions and modifications that could produce a win-win scenario for both the workers and the business entities [98]. Consequently, additional in-depth research with a human resource policy focus will assist in creating a well-balanced comprehension of FWP to cover operational requirements without sacrificing the many efficiency gains WFH brought to the forefront. In addition to further research into the human resources FWP sphere, it would also add value to perform a PESTLE analysis of remote work external factors that could influence remote work. Such an analysis will be able to consider the macro-effects that could conceivably influence business approaches, and similarly it could uncover prospective concerns that could have a key influence on the future of WFH.

4. Conclusions

This research produced a non-structured but detailed review of existing literature exploring FWP and remote work in a dispersed work landscape, both intra- and post-pandemic. In the context of employee and organisational dynamics, this study recognised that sustained optimum levels of worker morale and productivity are meaningful for furthering flexible work post-pandemic. Employee motivation and job satisfaction, as forecasters of efficient organisational performance levels, should reinforce work culture. Although C-19 was one of the greatest globally stressful events, this study acknowledges that lessons from a crisis should be applied to the organisational challenges we inherited and must address it as a priority post-pandemic. This includes the negative relationship between C-19 and its inferences on employee mental health, addressing communication virtual domain challenges and inadequate ICT, and restoring and adjusting corporate culture to operate efficiently in a virtual sphere, so that we can re-prioritise [remote] worker holistic health and wellbeing. Accordingly, in terms of application, training syllabi and policies should include ICT technical support, working hours, boundary management, task clarity, interacting, and training initiatives for remote work, as this will endorse and sustain the progression of the novel and now well-accepted post-pandemic work method.

Conflict of interest

It is declared that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this paper, as well as the published research results, including the financial aspects of conducting the research, obtaining and using its results, as well as any non-financial personal relationships.

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Data availability

The manuscript has no associated data.

Use of artificial intelligence

It is confirmed that no artificial intelligence technologies were used when creating the current work.

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