

Critical Success Factors for Leading Apparel E-Tailers in Cape Town, South Africa

Kayla Kim SAMPSON and Victor Virimai MUGOBO*

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

The South African retail apparel industry has and continues to undergo major digitisation. This movement better known as e-tailing has pioneered over the years and proven to be a lucrative way of trading. As a developing market, e-tailing has seen increased growth with great potential for new entrants to thrive. Only a small number of e-tailers were dominating the South African online apparel industry. In order to understand and further promote success in e-tailing, the researchers identified the need to determine the critical success factors of leading apparel e-tailers in South Africa. Identifying the CSFs proved to be an integral part of successful e-tailer survival. The objective of this study was, therefore, to establish and delve into the CSFs of both leading pure-play online apparel e-tailers and omnichannel or hybrid retailers based in Cape Town, South Africa. The study adopted a multiple case study approach and a qualitative methodology was used by employing an interpretive philosophical perspective. An exploratory design was appropriate for the study and an Inductive reasoning is a theory-building method which best explained the phenomena that are the subject of this study. The research paper further incorporated an empirical approach and the data comprised of four organisations primarily collected through semi-structured interviews from individuals that were connected to the organisations. The findings of the study revealed the most fundamental CSFs which consisted of five CSF groups, namely, 1) Business Intelligence, 2) Operations, 3) Organisational culture, 4) Business model and 5) Strategic modelling. Ultimately, the study recommended an effective growth and development framework for apparel e-tailers in Cape Town.

Keywords: critical success factors, e-tailing, apparel

JEL Classification: M30

1. Introduction

The concept of e-tailing has received a great deal of attention worldwide allowing consumers to make virtual purchases without physically visiting a store (Kavitha and Reddy, 2018, p.49). Retailing has become an intangible activity for many South Africans, yet the majority of the population continue to shop offline in physical brick and mortars, slowing down the rate of online growth in South Africa and generally in other African countries (Egbetokun et al., 2017, p.5). The Covid-19 pandemic however positively affected e-tailing

*Corresponding Author:
Victor Virimai Mugobo, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Article History:
Received 23 May 2022 | Accepted 6 December 2022 | Available online 17 January 2023

Cite Reference:
Sampson, K.K. and Mugobo, V.V., 2023. Critical Success Factors for Leading Apparel E-Tailers in Cape Town, South Africa. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 11(1), pp.1-11.

growth in South Africa – e.g., one of Africa’s largest e-tailing platforms Jumia announced a 50% increase in transactions throughout the first six months of 2020 (Mukhopadhyay and Mukhopadhyay, 2020, p.5). In addition, Mofokeng (2021, p.1) postulates that Covid-19 accelerated e-commerce growth in South Africa. South Africa’s largest retailers such as Woolworths, TFG and Truworths have all established an e-commerce presence by introducing online channels to their existing in store models by competing as a hybrid retailers and in an omni-channel environment (Goga et al., 2019, p.28; Min, 2021, p.3).

Several authors have recognised identifying the CSFs owing to the rapid growth in online (Varela et al., 2017; Aydin and Ayhan, 2018; Zumstein and Kotowski, 2020; Kara, 2020). The CSF concept has been used in different areas in the business such as ‘interactive management’ (Tuan, 2020), ‘project management’ (Adzmi and Hassen, 2018) and ‘product development’ (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In consequence, no studies were found by the researchers relating to South African e-tailers, therefore, this study sought to explore the CSFs of leading apparel e-tailers specifically in South Africa. With several new online stores entering the local and global market, the industry is experiencing steady growth and competition as a result of new entrants (Zumstein and Kotowski, 2020, p.4). The South African e-commerce market was valued to be a billion-dollar industry. In 2019 and predicted to grow annually at a compound growth rate and projected to increase to \$6.898m by 2025 (Mofokeng, 2021, p.2) and (Statista, 2021). Given the impressive statistics, it was therefore critical to investigate those key factors that have resulted in the success of South African e-tailers.

Essentially, the term CSFs was introduced by many researchers but popularised by John F Rockart 30 years ago. “CSFs are the limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful competitive performance for the individual, department or organization”. CSFs are those critical areas that must perform according to plan (Rockart and Bullen 1981, p.7). CSFs are crucial to the success of the manager, organisation, or the project at hand (Rockart and Bullen, 1981, p.12). The CSF process also assists organisations in identifying competitive business strategies and has guided strategic planning in several industries (Tuan, 2020, p.2). The aim of the research study was to identify the CSFs of the leading apparel e-tailers based in Cape Town, South Africa.

It is apparent from existing studies (Varela et al., 2017; Aydin et al., 2018) that additional research was required specifically relating to e-tailers operating in South Africa. The main objective of the study was therefore to identify and explain the CSFs of four leading online apparel retailers in South Africa, which can prepare and fully equip future potential e-tailers considering entering the market. The minor objectives were to establish the challenges that existing e-tailers are facing, identify holistic strategies that e-tailers can implement to combat these challenges and lastly, the development an effective growth and development framework for apparel e-tailers in Cape Town Furthermore, this research contributes greatly to the e-tailing body of knowledge by identifying the CSFs for effective e-tailing. The study provides significant factors that e-tailers should focus on in order to grow and expand, reaching new customers in various parts in South Africa and creating a social impact on society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The History of CSFs

The notion of CSFs was first introduced by Daniel (1969) and later popularised by Rockart (1979). Overtime it was discovered that CSFs not only assists in strategic alignment, but they help with guiding and prioritising tasks within various divisions of a business. Although strategic planning is a fundamental process, it is only the first step. Before identifying the CSFs, the organisation should perform well in key areas that are distinctive to the organisation’s mission and nature of the industry it is operating in (Rockart, 1979).

The original CSF method designed by Rockart in 1979 consisted of three phases. Phase one delved into the CSF introductory workshop which aimed to establish the organisation’s mission with the employees. At this stage the most significant activities were discussed, and top management was also required to engage. Phase two consisted of the CSF interviews whereby each manager disclosed the most critical elements for themselves and for the organisation. The participants were requested to construct a list prior to the interview and the interviews were used to further substantiate the factors, therefore the managers were also able to vocalise and effectively communicate the focal areas that should be concentrated on. The third and last phase involved the CSF workshop through which the team of researchers presented a synopsis of the organisation’s strategic plan moving forward which included the organisations mission and objectives. The CSFs was then

applied as an input to phases one and two, and finally a prototype was designed for management (Rockart, 1979; Cooper, 2008, p.3).

Since then, there have been many adaptations made to Rockart's original CSF method (Cooper, 2008, p.2). Rajak et al. (2021, p.4) and Zhou et al. (2011, p.245) highlight that organisations should avoid focusing on a large number of CSFs at one time and CSFs should be simple enough for all stakeholders to understand. Essentially, managers need to be aware of what the company needs in order to achieve successful outcomes. There are several research articles on CSFs of online retailing and or e-commerce. Accordingly, the CSFs in Table 1 were evaluated to determine how applicable they are to the research question.

Table 1: Articles relating to CSFs for online retailing/e-commerce

Article	Author	Date	CSFs
1.Critical Factors in Indonesia's E-Commerce Collaboration	Nurchahyo and Rand Putra.	2021	Customer orientation Ease of use of applications Product or service variations, Product and service delivery, Service speed aspects for Asian countries and service security aspects for the United States
2.Critical Success Factors of E-Commerce Collaboration in Indonesia	Putra, Nurchahyo and Farizal.	2021	Technological Readiness Speed and Flexibility Data and System Security Network and Partnership Owner-Manager Commitment Benefits for Organization Knowledge and Expertise in Digital Business Channel Distribution Strategy for Revenue Sharing Customer and Partner Trust Customer Satisfaction Scalability
3. Assessment of Critical Success Factors of E-business Leadership: A Case of SMEs in Costa Rica	Okot	2019	Trademark E-business organisational culture Customer focus Strong leadership Proper e-business technical infrastructure E-business strategy Privacy, trust and security Shipping and return policy Effective web site and content management Payment and collection platforms Top management support Social networks and Supplier orientation
4.Relevant Factors for Success as an Online Entrepreneur in Thailand	Phonthanukitithaworn, Ketkaew and Naruetharadhol.	2019	Achieve orientation Ease of use Government support Networking Risk taking propensity Reliability After-sale service Brand image Logistics and transportation Product quality Product price Advertising on social media Staff and employees

5. Integrated Framework based on Critical Success Factors for E-Commerce	Varela, Araújo, Veira, Manupati and Kakarla.	2017	Social Networks Web-marketing Design Usability Marketing Brand Market Communication Support Credibility Quality data processing Security Website Convert Consumer
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Source: authors' own compilation

There are several more articles Kha (2000), Fazmeer (2014), Cosgun and Dogerlioglu (2012) and Colla and Lapoule (2012) relating to the CSFs for e-commerce, however, a vast majority of the literature are dated and may not be relevant to e-tailers anymore. Additionally, the findings are based on the CSFs that are relevant to other countries and other international markets, differing from the South African e-tailing industry. It was therefore imperative to investigate the CSFs of South African e-tailers, taking into consideration the elements endured specific to the South African market.

2.2. Factors Hindering E-Tailing Growth in South Africa

Goga, Paelo and Nyamwena (2019) postulate potential reasons for the slow e-commerce growth rate in South Africa compared to other countries and these factors include the societal way of life, emphasising that there is a strong 'mall culture' which is seen as entertainment for many South Africans. In addition, many consumers still do not trust the online payment process as a result of the perceived lack of security during checkout therefore concerns over online fraud are high. Delivery costs are a key influencing factor when shopping online, especially for the lower income consumers. Lastly, businesses are reluctant to use the South African postal services due parcels arriving late and instances of theft which is seen as a downfall since delivery services are the backbone for e-commerce growth in various countries. In the first quarter of 2021, the online international retailer Wish announced a partnership with the South African Post Office with the aim of enhancing logistics, improving tracking and overall customer experience. Subsequently, such a partnership may be seen as an opportunity for local e-tailers to expand their logistic capabilities and increase customer reach (Lehrman and Kruger, 2021). Mthembu et al. (2018, p.33) reveal that the barriers to e-commerce in developing countries are related to poor Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, socio-economic conditions i.e., a poor educational system and a lack of technological knowledge. Additionally, cognitive barriers consist of broadband connectivity, online payments and cyber security.

3. Research Methodology

This paper adopted an interpretivist philosophical perspective which assisted the researcher to fully understand the role of each participant and their contribution to the study. The researchers ontological assumption was to assimilate the reality of the situations, make sense of all meanings and remain subjective in the way the data was collected, interpreted and analysed (Bonache and Festing, 2020, p.104). The researchers' epistemological assumption was co-created by the participant and the researcher through interactions with each other, not to generalise, but rather to see the world and the participants realistically in their respective positions. In consequence, the study was centred on exploring each participants experience and stance on identifying those critical factors that drive in e-tailer success.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach which is a form of social inquiry and is viewed as the foundation of the interpretative view, and this enabled the researchers to create "new, richer understandings" of the current e-tailing market and an in-depth understanding of South African e-tailing CSFs (Saunders et al., 2019, p.149). By adopting a qualitative research method the researchers were able to explain a particular phenomenon such as "why" the CSFs are significant and "how" it benefits the organisation (Mohajan, 2018, p.2). Woiceshyn and Daellenbach (2018, p.6) define the inductive approach to theory building

as the formation of concepts and theories based on observations about phenomenon. An inductive approach to theory development helped to gain a better understanding of the nature of the research problem (Saunders et al., 2019, p.155) which essentially enabled the researcher to formulate new theory surrounding CSFs for apparel e-tailers.

Twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively-selected participants from four different e-tailers using non-probability sampling and the study did not utilise secondary data sources. Purposive sampling is a strategy intentionally aimed at selecting specific participants and non-probability sampling is subjective in nature and suited to the kind of data sought in an interpretive study (Datta, 2018, p.2). The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility while discussing various topics, creating an immersive environment for participants to respond freely (Kakilla, 2021, p.1). Over and above the initial face-to-face interviews, in-depth email and telephonic interviews were employed as an alternative due to of the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, the study was conducted using a cross-sectional design, enabling the study to be conducted at a specific point in time and examining the prevalence of this phenomenon (Zangirolami-Raimundo et al., 2018, p.357).

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

In total, twelve individual interviews were conducted with three individuals from four different apparel e-tailers. The individuals that agreed to participate in the study were all in a management role and were selected from either an omnichannel or pure-play retailer. The population groups can be seen in more detail in table 2 below.

Table 2: The research participants

Participant Number	Type of Retailer	Position of Participant	Company Location
Participant 1	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 2	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 3	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 4	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 5	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Head of Buying	Western Cape
Participant 6	Pure-play Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 7	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Marketing Manager	Western Cape
Participant 8	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 9	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 10	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 11	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Buying Manager	Western Cape
Participant 12	Hybrid Apparel E-tailer	Head of Marketing	Western Cape

The data was arranged and analysed using a qualitative analysis tool known as Atlas.ti 8. The Atlas.ti is an example of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) software developed to assist with analysing qualitative data (Soratto et al., 2020, p.2). The data was analysed using the coding process by breaking it down and making sense of the data in regard to the study's research questions (Elliot, 2018, p.2851). Patterns were identified and code groups were created to draw connections among elements of the data.

4. Findings

The interviews with the participants identified and highlighted the CSFs for the e-tailers in this study. Subsequently, CSFs emerged from five out of the six code groups in the analysis, namely, 1) Business Intelligence, 2) Operations, 3) Organisational culture, 4) Business model and 5) Strategic modelling. Five CSFs were identified and sub CSFs were found to be fundamental in understanding which areas the e-tailers should concentrate on specifically. The findings are summarised in table 2 below.

Table 3: CSF groups

Critical Success Factor 1 – Business Intelligence	
Business Intelligence:	Customer Profiling
Business Intelligence:	Managing Product Supply/Demand/Timing
Business Intelligence:	Market Research, Innovation and Adaption

Business Intelligence:	Pricing Margin and Profitability
Business Intelligence:	Product Testing and Monitoring
Marketing:	Advertising, Promotions and social media presence
Marketing:	Brand Social Identity, Reputation and Customer Retention
Critical Success Factor 2 – Operations	
Effective Logistics Operations	
Efficient e-tailing platforms	
Financial Planning and Budgeting	
Critical Success Factor 3 – Organisational Culture	
Organisational Culture:	Quality Assurance and Customer Services
Personal Factors:	Interpersonal and Leadership
Critical Success Factor 4 – Business Model	
Business Model:	Product Diversification
Business Model:	Bricks-and-clicks
Critical Success Factor 5 – Strategic Modelling	
Strategic Modelling:	Planning, Communication and Implementation
Strategic Modelling:	Short-term vs. Long-term planning
Strategic Partnership with Service Providers and Merchandise	

5. Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study which analysed the interviews pursuant to the research objective.

Literature revealed similar CSFs such as e-business organisational culture, marketing, social networking, brand significance, customer satisfaction corresponding with the CSFs found in previous studies (Putra et al., 2021; Okot, 2019; Varela et al., 2017). CSF one, business intelligence, was found to be the largest most fundamental CSFs contributing towards e-tailer success.

5.1. Code Group 1: Business Intelligence

Business intelligence can be described as a tool or platform that supports decision making for online businesses, using technology to analyse data (Sun, 2021, p.1). The first CSF that formed part of business intelligence was customer profiling which was found to be fundamental in targeting specific customer groups, through market research customer demographics are categorised and consumer behaviour is monitored and used to improve overall sales (Hassan and Tabasum, 2020, p.25). Managing product supply, demand and timing as CSF is a relationship that needed to be balanced and closely monitored, pertaining specifically to stock levels, adhering to critical path and retaining an integrated supply chain. Market research, innovation and adaption as a CSF delved into the significance of forecasting market and fashion trends, developing, and sustaining an authentic brand yet ensuring the business remains flexible to an ever-changing market.

Dana et al. (2022, p.5) agree that research and design promoted the lack of innovation. Pricing margins and profitability proved to be eminent for the e-tailers, proving that product pricing is key, since it directly affected profit and revenue. This finding corroborates with Song and Ji (2022, p.9) finding that developing pricing strategies improved retailers' profits. Product testing and monitoring demonstrated how certain products are sold but the performance is closely monitored to determine its market reception. Although product testing is risky, it suggested a new configuration of customer groups and enables boundaries for innovation. Advertising, promotions and a social media presence indicated how effective marketing is and how it benefited these organisations. Hanafizadeh et al.'s (2021, p.9) findings confirmed that social media platforms and business networking sites can assist value creation in organisations. The following two CSFs formed part of marketing, optimising social media platforms, running promotions that target consumer groups and advertising brands contribute towards increased sales. Brand social identity, reputation and customer retention as a CSF focused on protecting corporate reputation while building a unique brand that customers can relate to. In order to improve customer retention, the e-tailers have used social media platforms to safeguard customers' trust

and customer loyalty. Molinillo et al. (2019, p.104) results corroborate that all these variables are prominent factors in building a firm's success. Furthermore, focusing on a brands functionality/quality and symbolism/personality can increase brand loyalty, reputation and value.

5.2. Code Group 2: Operations

Effective logistic operations included the efficiency of systems for ordering, warehousing and delivery. Well-established logistic operations increased competitiveness and overall sales. Pradha (2018, p.4) supported this finding and added that advancements in technology require retailers' to improve infrastructure, communication and the overall logistics function. Additionally, efficient e-tailing platforms focused on an effective user-friendly website that attracted and retained consumers.

The website was found to be the key differentiator exhibiting brand uniqueness, furthermore, the correct technological infrastructure and speed needs to be employed to support online shopping and transactions. Daroch et al. (2021, p.48) concurred with these findings that efficient e-tailing platforms such as a user-friendly website, easy product searches and simplified navigation can also be seen as marketing strategies used by online retailers. Financial planning and budgeting involved long-term and short-term planning which determined the organisation departmental budgets. Conversely, pure-players fundamentally plan and budget on operational costs such as couriers, returns and maintenance, while among hybrid retailers, campaigning and running promotions were extensively budgeted for.

5.3. Code Group 3: Organisational Culture

Organisational culture consisted of quality assurance and customer services and interpersonal and leadership CSFs. Firstly, it was found that the e-tailers prioritise quality assurance throughout the online customer experience whereby a high quality product should be accompanied by excellent customer service, helping e-tailers to distinguish themselves. A study conducted by Vasic et al. (2019, p.82) validated the finding that high quality goods have a positive effect on customer satisfaction, resulting in customers returning to shop online. Secondly, interpersonal and leadership factors included aspects such as team dynamics, a positive work environment and an overall open interpersonal culture which resulted in operational efficiency. Thus, agreeing with a study conducted by Strukan et al., (2019p.57) that the appealing behaviour of a leader positively affected individuals and business performance.

5.4. Code Group 4: Business Model

Business model also consisted of two CSFs, namely, product diversification and bricks-and-clicks. Product diversification demonstrated how increased product variety can increase e-tailers value proposition, expanding merchandise groups increases competitive advantage. Sanjo and Udosen (2019, p.128) validated this finding, substantiating the importance to diversify product lines to better fulfil customers' needs. Moreso, diversification had a positive effect on an organisations performance. On the other hand, bricks-and-clicks underscored the importance of the type of business model the e-tailer chooses to follow. Brick-and-mortars have physical stores and online stores whereas clicks only trade online, ultimately the type of business model should be operationally beneficial. To the contrary, Dr. M.K and Dr. Maheswari substantiated that integrating bricks-and-mortars and clicks will create sustainable development for the organisation and satisfy the needs of customers across all channels.

5.5. Code Group 5: Strategic Modelling

Strategic modelling comprises of planning, communication and implementation, short-term vs. long-term planning and strategic partnership with service providers. The planning, communication and implementation process was crucial at each level of the organisation whereby communication regarding strategic decisions is filtered down from top-level management. Markovic and Salamzadeh (2018, p.26) agree that effective communication not only clarifies messages, build, and explain business goals, but it gathers crucial information to plan and implement business decisions.

It was found that decision making, and implementation happen at a faster rate than in hybrid retailers. Short-term vs. long-term planning as a CSF were both found to be equally important as short-term strategies enable the business to be flexible and to adjust to market changes whereas long-term strategies is the top-line plan and the strategic intent for the entire organisation. Lastly, the CSF relating to strategic partnership with service providers emphasised the partnerships between the e-tailer and external brands and suppliers. They enabled the e-tailers, especially pure-players to diversify product offerings, remain flexible in terms of delivery, stock and during the manufacturing of goods. It was found that the purely online retailers in this study followed two types of business models referred to as 'marketplace' where the e-tailers own and sell third-party goods on their website and receive a commission from the sales. The second model is known as 'retail division' which are the e-tailers own brand or 'private label', the goods are designed and manufactured in-house. Joshi (2022p.240) confirmed this finding, indicating that the Covid-19 lockdown compelled online retailers to drive innovation, establishing plans with their stakeholders to make their supply chains more responsive i.e., a contactless delivery option and direct-to-consumer delivery.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to establish the relevant factors that result in the success of apparel e-tailers trading in the South Africa market. The research aimed to determine the root causes of success for apparel pure-play online retailers as well as hybrid retail companies. Nonetheless, the research problem was to identify the CSFs for leading apparel e-tailers in South Africa. The CSFs identified in this study are pertinent for all four apparel e-tailers that participated in the study however, some e-tailers focused more greatly on certain areas than others.

Pure-players focused more on budgeting for operational costs such as couriers, customer returns and overall maintenance. Conversely, the findings indicated that poor quality products lead to more customer returns, which increased operational costs. The key differentiators identified were a unique, user-friendly website, a diverse offering increases value proposition, hence the decision to compete as a pure-player or hybrid retailer should be intentional. Essentially, the CSFs identified at organisational level indicated that the pure-players in this study competed with two types of business models known as 'marketplace' and 'retail division' whereas the hybrid retailers' focus was to maintain integration across all channels, furthermore, the findings showed that pure-players operate as B2B. The CSFs connected to strategic modelling highlighted the significance of communication throughout the organisation moreover, long-term strategies were essential for comprehensive planning which defined long-term goals whereas short-term strategies were necessary to allow the business to adjust and achieve short-term targets. Finally, maintaining healthy relationships with suppliers and stakeholders were identified as vital to remain agile.

Recommendation 1

Conclusively, it is the recommendation of this study that well defined CSFs are viewed as distinguishable strategies that increases the businesses return on investment (ROI). These strategies are a way for future potential apparel e-tailers to benchmark their performance. The CSFs recognised in this study helps the business and management to concentrate on the important matters required to growth and become successful.

Recommendation 2

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the organisations identify CSFs at different organisational levels to ensure that a consistent strategy is followed which are in line with the strategic direction of the business. In practice, the CSFs would require adjustments to be made according to the businesses goals and needs.

6.1. Direction for Future Studies

This research study provided a basis to accommodate further research into establishing the CSFs for South African apparel online retailers in wanting to enter and trade in international markets. This type of study would assist local apparel e-tailers with growth development plans as well as developing international strategies to penetrate international markets which can be applied and adapted to suite the e-tailer.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this study is that it is limited to only four organisations and the sample size is limited to three interviews per organisation. Consequently, the generalisability of the results may be limited. The researcher does however believe that she has selected the most relevant cases to provide the data required for the study.

Author Contributions: Kayla Kim Sampson: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Findings, Conclusion, Recommendations, Writing – Original draft preparation and production of final draft. Victor Virimai Mugobo: Resources, Supervision, Literature Review, Data Collection, Data Analysis.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors state that they have no conflicts of interest.

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