



The relationship between service recovery fairness, customer emotional responses and customer behavioral responses in fitness clubs



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ABSTRACT

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The previous research has failed to comprehensively examine the relationship between the negative emotional responses of customers and negative customer behaviors that may arise despite efforts towards service recovery fairness. Accordingly, this study investigated the relationship between service recovery fairness and customers' emotional responses by classifying members of a fitness club who encountered service failure into positive and negative categories. A survey was carried out to gather data from members of fitness clubs in Korea who have encountered service failures using a convenience sampling method. Service recovery fairness had a positive influence on customers' favorable emotions and a negative effect on their unfavorable emotions. It was discovered that positive emotions had a positive effect on intentions to recommend and loyalty while having a negative impact on intentions to switch upon investigating the impact of customers' emotional responses on their behavioral responses. Conversely, negative emotions were shown to have a negative impact on intentions to recommend and loyalty, yet a positive impact on intentions to switch. Fitness clubs must enhance service recovery fairness after a service failure to manage customer emotions and establish long-term relationships.

Contribution/ Originality: Previous research on service failure and recovery focused on exploring the link between service recovery fairness, positive emotions, and customer behavior. However, this study considered potential negative emotional responses that may arise despite the service efforts in fitness clubs. This approach may help understand the relationship between negative emotions and customer behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fitness clubs regularly experience the risk of service failures even when they are prepared for various issues due to direct interaction with customers [1]. A service failure occurs when a provider fails to meet customer expectations or faces unforeseen challenges that result in dissatisfaction [2]. Examples include unexpected service disruptions, poor service quality or inadequate handling of complaints [3]. These failures can lead to negative outcomes such as unfavorable word-of-mouth, loss of trust, customer defection or churn [4]. Consequently, fitness clubs must develop strategies to quickly address customer dissatisfaction caused by service failures and restore the situation to its pre-failure state.

Service recovery involves the process of regaining customer trust and satisfaction by identifying the cause of the failure and taking appropriate corrective action [5]. Research on service failure and recovery has highlighted that effectively addressing customer inconvenience or loss after a failure can result in even higher evaluations of the

service provider than before the incident [6-8]. Thus, building long-term customer relationships and fostering loyalty is essential in the service recovery context.

Research on service recovery in the marketing field has increased with the recognition of service recovery's importance in customer service management. Studies have focused on determining the influence of customers' perceived fairness of a firm's service recovery efforts after a service failure affects customers' emotional responses and their emotional responses on customer behavior [9-11]. These studies suggest that both customers' perceptions of fair service recovery efforts and emotional responses were equally important in mitigating customer dissatisfaction following a service failure and ultimately leading to positive customer behavior.

Emotional responses are related to the positive or negative feelings customers have about a product or brand which can positively or negatively influence their purchase decisions and service experiences [12]. Customers may show positive or negative emotional responses to the efforts made by service providers to restore fairness in service recovery situations which may further positively or negatively impact their behavior after a service failure [11].

When customers perceive a company's response to service failures as fair, it can positively influence their emotional responses which can result in increased repurchase intent and a decreased likelihood of negative word-of-mouth communication. On the other hand, if customers do not perceive a company's attempts to recover as fair, these efforts may result in negative emotional responses from customers which can diminish their desire to make repeat purchases and increase their likelihood of spreading negative word-of-mouth.

However, the focus of previous studies on service recovery in the marketing field was limited to the causal relationship between service recovery fairness, positive emotional responses and positive customer behavior. However, they have not comprehensively examined the relationship between customers' negative emotional responses and negative customer behavior that may occur despite perceptions of fair service recovery efforts [13]. Therefore, this study aims to classify the fitness club members' emotional responses as positive and negative responses after a service-failure experience and analyze their relationship with service recovery fairness. It also aims to empirically analyze how members' positive and negative responses affect the sub-factors of customer behavior such as word-of-mouth intention, switching intention and loyalty.

This study aims to understand the structural relationships between the recovery efforts of fitness clubs implemented after service failures and the customers' positive and negative emotional responses as well as their behaviors. The results of this study may be helpful for fitness clubs to formulate service recovery strategies for emotional management and establish long-term relationships with fitness club customers. The structure of this paper is composed of the following sections: introduction, theoretical background and hypothesis setting, research methods, results, discussion and conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS SETTING

2.1. Service Recovery Fairness

According to service recovery research findings, fairness in service recovery is an important factor in reversing negative responses of customers towards a service failure. Fairness in service recovery refers to the degree of fairness and justice that customers, that is, buyers and users perceive in the service provided to recover from a service failure [14].

When customers perceive fairness in the service recovery process, they feel positive emotions about the service provided for recovery which leads to positive consumer behavior [15]. Conversely, when customers perceive unfairness in the service recovery process, they experience negative emotions toward the service recovery efforts, which leads to negative consumer behavior [15]. Therefore, fairness in service recovery is an important antecedent in determining the kind of customer responses and attitudes elicited by the company's service recovery efforts.

Factors that influence customers perceptions of fair service recovery efforts are generally categorized into procedural fairness, interactional fairness and distributive fairness [16, 17]. Procedural fairness refers to the fair

application of rules and procedures used in the service recovery process to all customers [18]. The service recovery process is considered fair when the customer's complaint is quickly communicated to the staff and handled by following appropriate procedure and method [18]. Interactional fairness refers to the belief that customers are treated fairly during their interactions with the company during problem resolution [19]. A company's service recovery efforts are considered fair when employees completely listen to the customer and express sincere apology or courteous behavior during problem resolution [19]. Distributive fairness refers to the fair distribution of compensation or benefits to customers during the service recovery process [20]. In other words, when the monetary and non-monetary compensation received for a complaint is highly satisfactory and appropriate, the company's recovery efforts are considered fair [20].

2.2. Customers' Emotional Responses

Customers' emotional responses are defined as psychological emotions customers experience in response to various situations or stimuli [21]. In this study, we categorize the emotional responses of customers into positive and negative emotions because customers' emotions towards service recovery fairness are usually expressed as positive or negative emotions such as happiness and satisfaction or sadness, anger, and anxiety, respectively [22, 23].

Previous research on service failure and recovery has identified a cognitive dimension in service recovery fairness as a key factor influencing customers' emotional responses [10, 24-27]. These studies reveal that when customers perceive the service recovery process as fair, they tend to feel positive emotions towards the recovery efforts. Conversely, when customers view the recovery process as unfair, they are likely to experience negative emotions. The following hypotheses have been proposed based on these previous findings:

H1: Service recovery fairness provided by the fitness club will have a positive effect on customers' positive emotions.

H1-1: Procedural fairness will positively impact customers' positive emotions.

H1-2: Interactional fairness will positively impact customers' positive emotions.

H1-3: Distributive fairness will positively impact customers' positive emotions.

H2: Service recovery fairness provided by the fitness club will negatively impact customers' negative emotions.

H2-1: Procedural fairness will negatively impact customers' negative emotions.

H2-2: Interactional fairness will negatively impact customers' negative emotions.

H2-3: Distributive fairness will negatively impact customers' negative emotions.

2.3. Customer Behavior Responses

A behavioral response is an indication that a customer will take some action regarding a particular product, service or situation [28]. Customers evaluate a product or service after purchasing it and become satisfied if it meets their expectations which leads to their willingness to recommend or remain loyal to the product or service [29]. Contrarily, when customers become dissatisfied, they exhibit switching behavior which involves discontinuing the use of the product or service and using products or services of other companies [29]. Therefore, identifying the antecedent variables that influence customers' behavior is crucial for companies to sustain relationships with their customers. In this study, we have focused on specific customer behaviors such as recommendation intention [30], switching intention [31] and loyalty [1] based on previous studies on service failure and recovery.

In consumer behavior research, emotional responses are well-known antecedents that impact customers' behavioral intentions [31-33]. Positive emotions lead to favorable attitudes towards a certain product or brand which may further strengthen the customer's behavioral intention to choose that product or brand [34]. Conversely, when a customer experiences negative emotion towards a certain brand or product, the customer's brand loyalty may decrease which can negatively affect their behavioral intentions in the future such as to

repurchase or recommend to others [34]. The following hypotheses have been proposed based on the aforementioned previous studies:

H3: Customers' positive emotions about the service recovery process will impact their behavioral responses.

H3-1: Customers' positive emotions will positively impact their recommendation intention.

H3-2: Customers' positive emotions will positively impact their switching intention.

H3-3: Customers' positive emotions will positively impact their loyalty.

H4: Customers' negative emotions about the service recovery process will impact their behavioral responses.

H4-1: Customers' negative emotions will negatively impact their recommendation intention.

H4-2: Customers' negative emotions will negatively impact their switching intention.

H4-3: Customers' negative emotions will negatively impact their loyalty.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Model

This study aims to empirically clarify the structural relationships among service recovery fairness in fitness clubs, customers' emotional responses, and customers' behavioral responses. Previous research focused on the causal relationship between service recovery fairness, customers' positive emotional responses, and customers' behavioral responses. However, this study incorporated the potential negative emotional responses of customers that may arise despite the service recovery efforts in fitness clubs. This approach may contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between customers' positive emotions and their behavioral responses as well as between negative emotions and behavioral responses following the service recovery efforts of fitness clubs. Figure 1 illustrates the model that this study seeks to analyze.

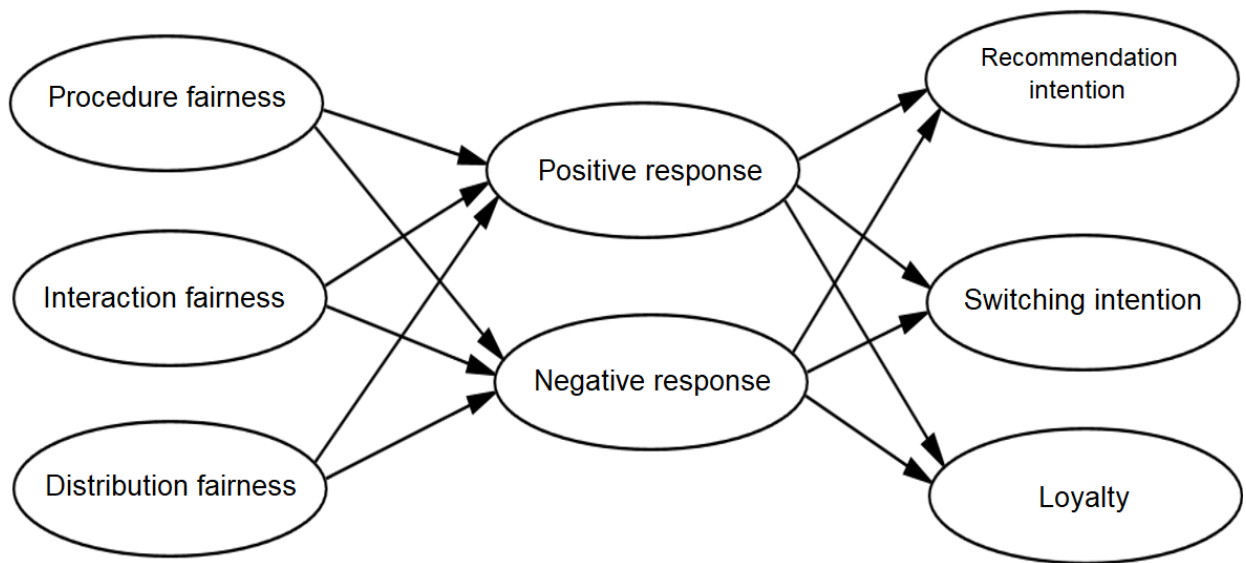


Figure 1. Research model for this study.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

In this study, we conducted a survey to empirically analyze the structural model regarding the effects of service recovery fairness on customers' emotional and behavioral responses. The subjects of this study were fitness club members in Seoul, Gyeonggi Province, and Busan, South Korea who had faced service failures and the samples were selected using convenience sampling. Of the 300 copies of the questionnaire that were completed, 276 were used in the final statistical analysis as 24 were deemed dishonest. The characteristics of the respondents are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. General characteristics of subjects (n = 276).

Classification		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	150	54.3
	Female	126	45.7
Age	20s	100	36.2
	30s	77	27.9
	40s	69	25.0
	50s or older	30	10.9
Occupation	Student	76	27.5
	Professional	27	9.8
	Employee	56	20.3
	Public servant	32	11.6
	Self-employed	85	30.8

3.3. Variable Measurement

The questionnaire used in this study comprised 3 demographic characteristics questions, 9 service recovery fairness questions, 8 customer emotional response questions, and 9 customer behavioral response questions. All questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale except for demographic characteristics.

The measurement items for service recovery fairness factors were modified to fit the context of this study from the questionnaire used by Noh [35] based on the questions used in previous studies. The questionnaire consisted of 9 items on 3 factors (procedural fairness, interactional fairness and distributive fairness).

The measurement items for customer emotional response factors were modified to fit the context of this study from the questionnaire used by Xiong [36] based on the questions used in previous studies. The questionnaire consisted of 8 items on 2 factors (positive and negative emotions).

The measurement items for customer behavioral response factors were adapted from the questionnaire used by Xiong [36], Park [37] and So [38] based on the questions used in previous studies. The items were modified to fit the context of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 9 items on 3 factors (recommendation intention, switching intention and loyalty).

3.4. Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using the statistical software programs SPSS version 23.0 and Amos version 23.0. A frequency analysis was performed to identify demographic characteristics and correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between the variables measured. The reliability of the measurement tools was verified by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were carried out using AMOS to evaluate the validity of the constructs and test the hypotheses.

3.5. Validity and Reliability of the Variable Measurement

Table 2 presents the confirmatory factor analysis results. The model fit indices were as follows: root mean square residual (RMR) = .040, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .901, comparative fit index (CFI) = .918 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .096 demonstrating that the model met the general standards for good fit [35].

The average variance extracted (AVE) and construct reliability (CR) values for each factor exceeded .50 and .70, respectively. Furthermore, the AVE between variables was higher than the squared correlation coefficient (see Table 3). These findings confirm that the scales used in the study possess adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

Additionally, the reliability coefficients for each variable used in this study were all found to be above .80. Therefore, the reliability of the measurement items used in this study was confirmed [35].

Table 2. Results of confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

Variables		Esti.	S.E.	C.R.	CR	AVE	α
Procedure fairness	It is easy to convey your complaint to the staff.	1			0.917	0.789	0.893
	The staff immediately identifies and promptly handles your complaint.	1.251	0.078	16.043			
	Handling of the complaint is carried out in an appropriate and customer-oriented manner.	1.156	0.075	15.423			
Interaction fairness	The staff displays polite manners and courteous attitudes during problem-solving.	1			0.955	0.879	0.908
	The staff sincerely apologizes and fully listens to your opinions.	1.013	0.013	77.414			
	The staff genuinely considers your position while resolving the issue.	0.682	0.047	14.584			
Distribution fairness	Although you experience some inconvenience, you are satisfied with the compensation provided by the fitness club.	1			0.912	0.777	0.879
	The fitness club makes sufficient economic compensation for resolving your issue.	0.978	0.053	18.614			
	The outcome of your complaint handling is very fair.	0.791	0.054	14.665			
Positive response	Overall, you are satisfied with the service and recovery of the fitness club.	1			0.945	0.811	0.904
	You are generally pleased with the service after the service failure.	0.990	0.957	17.508			
	The fitness club's response to the service failure is better than expected.	0.981	0.054	18.042			
	You are satisfied with the way the fitness club handled the service failure.	0.913	0.057	16.088			
Negative response	You regret choosing the fitness club.	1			0.963	0.867	0.948
	You think it would have been better to use another fitness club.	1.034	0.058	17.737			
	You are very unhappy with the service at the fitness club.	1.159	0.053	22.066			
	You feel anger about your experience at the fitness club.	1.138	0.054	20.885			
Recommendation intention	You will recommend the fitness club to others.	1			0.965	0.903	0.941
	You will introduce the fitness club to people around you.	1.160	0.047	24.676			
	You will speak positively about the fitness club.	1.082	0.049	22.154			
Switching intention	You will switch fitness clubs in the future.	1			0.957	0.882	0.951
	You will look for information necessary to switch to another fitness club in the future.	1.066	0.039	27.654			
	You have considered switching from the current fitness club to another.	1.025	0.040	25.901			
Loyalty	You intend to prioritize using the fitness club.	1			0.970	0.915	0.958
	You intend to re-enroll at the fitness club.	1.123	0.039	28.966			
	Even if other fitness clubs offer better conditions, you will continue to use this fitness club.	1.076	0.041	26.204			

4. RESULTS

4.1. Correlation Analysis

Table 3 shows the correlations between the measurement variables used in this study. The correlation coefficients between the measurement variables were found to be statistically significant at the .1 level.

Table 3. Correlation analysis among study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Procedure	1 (0.789)							
Interaction	0.493**	1 (0.879)						
Distribution	0.487**	0.493**	1 (0.777)					
Positive	0.621**	0.668**	0.569**	1 (0.811)				
Negative	-0.400**	-0.394**	-0.405**	-0.506**	1 (0.867)			
Recommendation	0.463**	0.554*	0.460**	0.688*	-0.530**	1 (0.903)		
Switching	-0.346**	-0.374**	-0.355**	-0.481**	0.742**	-0.532**	1 (0.882)	
Loyalty	0.464**	0.491**	0.426*	0.613**	-0.545**	0.690**	-0.532**	1(0.915)

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < 0.01$, ()=AVE.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

The goodness of fit for the structural model was found to be relatively appropriate with RMR = .042, TLI = .905, CFI = .918, and RMSEA = .095. The results of the structural model analysis based on the research model are as follows (see Table 4):

First, the sub-factors of service recovery fairness, namely procedural fairness ($\beta = .317$, $p < .001$), interactional fairness ($\beta = .362$, $p < .001$), and distributive fairness ($\beta = .290$, $p < .001$) were observed to exhibit a significant and positive effect on positive emotions, thereby supporting hypothesis 1.

Second, the sub-factors of service recovery fairness, namely procedural fairness ($\beta = -.203$, $p < .01$), interactional fairness ($\beta = -.168$, $p < .01$), and distributive fairness ($\beta = -.237$, $p < .001$) were observed to exhibit a significant and negative effect on negative emotions leading to the acceptance of hypothesis 2.

Third, positive emotions were observed to exhibit a significant effect on customer behavioral responses such as recommendation intention ($\beta = .620$, $p < .001$), switching intention ($\beta = -.135$, $p < .05$), and loyalty ($\beta = .504$, $p < .001$) leading to the acceptance of hypothesis 3.

Fourth, negative emotions were observed to exhibit a significant effect on customer behavioral responses such as recommendation intention ($\beta = -.212$, $p < .001$), switching intention ($\beta = .695$, $p < .001$), and loyalty ($\beta = -.268$, $p < .001$) leading to the acceptance of hypothesis 4.

Table 4. Structural model analysis results.

Hypotheses testing	Estimate		S.E.	C.R.
	B	β		
H1-1: Procedural fairness → Positive emotion	0.257	0.317	0.045	5.657***
H1-2: Interactional fairness → Positive emotion	0.291	0.362	0.043	6.827***
H1-3: Distributive fairness → Positive emotion	0.217	0.290	0.043	5.036***
H2-1: Procedural fairness → Negative emotion	-0.185	-0.203	0.061	-3.027**
H2-2: Interactional fairness → Negative emotion	-0.151	-0.168	0.057	-2.666**
H2-3: Distributive fairness → Negative emotion	-0.199	-0.237	0.058	-3.401***
H3-1: Positive emotion → Recommendation intention	0.761	0.620	0.076	9.988***
H3-2: Positive emotion → Switching intention	-0.199	-0.135	0.077	-2.579*
H3-3: Positive emotion → Loyalty	0.702	0.504	0.087	8.075***
H4-1: Negative emotion → Recommendation intention	-0.231	-0.212	0.058	-3.968***
H4-2: Negative emotion → Switching intention	0.913	0.695	0.078	11.687***
H4-3: Negative emotion → Loyalty	-0.332	-0.268	0.071	-4.666***

Note: $\chi^2 = 968.370$ (df= 280, $p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.458$, RMR=.042, TLI=.905, CFI=.918, RMSEA=.095. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to verify the structural relationship between service recovery fairness, customer emotional responses, and customer behavioral responses using a sample of fitness club members. The academic and practical implications of this study are presented as follows:

First, service recovery fairness has a positive effect on customers' positive emotions. This result is consistent with previous studies that claimed that higher levels of procedural, interactional and distributive fairness lead to higher levels of positive customer emotions [9, 39, 40]. Therefore, it is important for fitness clubs to focus on the service recovery process and handle it fairly to enhance positive customer emotions after a service failure.

In this study, interaction fairness was identified as the service recovery fairness factor that had the greatest relative impact on customers' positive emotions. Therefore, fitness clubs need to ensure that employees who have direct face-to-face contact with customers after a service failure genuinely address customer issues, empathize with them, and make every effort to resolve complaints. This will help customers perceive that they are being treated humanely and fairly throughout the service recovery process. All fitness club employees should learn to treat customers fairly and kindly. At the same time, they need to be trained on how to respond appropriately to various service failure situations through customer service training.

Second, service recovery fairness negatively affects customers' negative emotions. This supports the findings of studies that concluded that customers' negative emotions can be mitigated when companies respond and handle service failures fairly [9, 27, 41]. In this study, procedural fairness was identified as the service recovery fairness factor that had the greatest relative impact on customers' negative emotions. Therefore, fitness clubs need to apply consistent and fair procedures in problem-solving processes after a service failure so that customers believe that the problem they are facing is handled fairly. Fitness clubs should develop manuals for refunds, compensation and problem resolution procedures and make them transparent to ensure that customers can quickly and consistently resolve issues. Additionally, clear communication with customers is necessary to convey the problem-solving process and keep customers informed of the progress.

Third, examining the effects of customer emotional response factors on customer behavioral response factors revealed that positive emotions had a positive impact on word-of-mouth intention and loyalty and a negative impact on switching intention. Conversely, negative emotions had a negative impact on word-of-mouth intention and loyalty and a positive impact on switching intention. These results align with previous studies that emphasized the importance of generating positive emotions through the service recovery process to enhance customers' word-of-mouth intentions and loyalty and to prevent switching to competitors after a service failure [30, 42, 43].

The findings of this study indicate that higher levels of procedural, interactional and distributive fairness in service recovery after a service failure lead to higher levels of positive customer emotions and lower levels of negative customer emotions. Therefore, fitness clubs need to establish clear procedures for resolving service failures and ensure they are promptly executed. Additionally, fitness clubs must sincerely apologize to customers for service failures and provide a clear and honest explanation of the cause of the problem and the solution. Furthermore, fitness clubs should compensate customers fairly for the inconvenience caused by the service failure and improve internal procedures to prevent recurrence, so that customers can trust that the problem will not happen again.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Implications

This study empirically demonstrated that enhancing service recovery fairness after a service failure is critical for fitness clubs to manage customer emotions and build long-term relationships. Consumers perceive that they are being treated fairly. The experience of failure can lead to greater trust and satisfaction. Ultimately, this approach can increase customer loyalty, attract more customers through positive word-of-mouth and reduce consumers' switching intentions.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that need to be addressed in future research despite these implications. First, this study was limited to fitness clubs which may pose a generalization issue when applying the causal relationships

between service recovery fairness, customer emotions, and behavioral responses to other service sectors. Therefore, future research should empirically analyze the structural relationship between service recovery fairness, customer emotions and behavioral responses in various service fields. Second, this study categorized service recovery fairness into three dimensions: procedural, interactional and distributive fairness. However, future research should consider additional sub-dimensions such as interpersonal and informational fairness to better understand the complexity of customer experiences and develop more effective recovery strategies after service failures [27].

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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