

Impact of theatre on nursing students' perspectives on mental health and psychiatric patients: a metaphor-based qualitative study

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Research Article

Keywords: Nursing student, Theatre, Metaphors, Mental health, Psychiatric nursing

Posted Date: October 6th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10836787/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Background

In recent years, active learning methods such as simulation, theatre, role-playing, and narrative photography have begun to be used to improve students' positive attitudes, empathy and motivation levels, creativity and learning skills.

Objectives

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of theatre on nursing students' perspectives on mental health and psychiatric patients.

Methods

Purposeful sampling method was used in this qualitative-descriptive design. Eighty-nine final year nursing students were instructed to express their experiences using a metaphor by completing the sentence: "The theater activity applied in the mental health and psychiatric nursing course is like., because." COREQ guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process.

Results

A total of 89 metaphors related to the theater activity were obtained from the students. Through metaphor analysis, six main themes emerged: (1) Cultivating empathy through theatrical immersion; (2) Embodying mental illness through theatre; (3) Bridging knowledge and practice; (4) Learning through enjoyment; (5) Enhancing knowledge retention through theatre; and (6) Experiencing a psychiatric ward through theatre.

Conclusions

For nursing students, theater activities foster empathy by bringing mental health experiences to life, integrate theoretical knowledge with practice, make learning enjoyable and lasting, and enable them to realistically experience the psychiatric ward environment.

Clinical trial number: not applicable

Introdruction

In Türkiye, the Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing course is offered in the final year after completion of other nursing courses. It aims to develop therapeutic communication skills, provide knowledge about mental disorders and treatments, and help students recognize and transform their cultural and social perceptions, including negative attitudes [1]. However, communicating with individuals with mental illness is often perceived as complex and challenging, which may discourage students from choosing

psychiatric nursing as a career [2]. Therefore, additional therapeutic interventions are needed to strengthen students' nursing competencies and communication skills for psychiatric settings.

Evidence indicates that some students hold negative attitudes toward mental health and psychiatric nursing. For example, students reported low interest in pursuing mental health nursing at both the beginning and end of a course [3]. Differences were also found in negative stereotypes, career preferences, and anxiety levels between students exposed to coursework and clinical practice and those who were not [4]. However, other studies show improvements in attitudes through both theoretical education and clinical experience, with greater reductions in stigma observed during clinical placements [5]. While some students demonstrate accepting attitudes, concerns about danger persist.

Students often perceive psychiatric nursing as a challenging career and may avoid it due to negative attitudes toward patients. Many report uncertainty about specializing in mental health nursing, anxiety when working with psychiatric patients, and concerns about unpredictability [6]. Sailahari et al. found that only about 30% of students are willing to specialize in this field and highlighted the need for initiatives to foster empathic attitudes [7]. Similarly, students would develop more positive attitudes if they improved their psychiatric skills and had greater opportunities to apply them in practice [8].

In recent years, active learning methods such as simulation, theater, role-playing, and narrative photography have been used to enhance students' attitudes, empathy, motivation, creativity, and learning skills. Narrative photography supports creativity and understanding of theory, while theater activities contribute to personal growth, relationships, and vulnerability [9,10]. Virtual reality improves technical competence, psychomotor skills, and empathy, particularly toward patients with dementia [11]. Therefore, theater-based group work is expected to enhance students' empathy, psychiatric knowledge, skills, and perspectives.

This study aims to evaluate the theater activity implemented in the Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing course through students' perspectives using metaphor analysis, and to reveal their perceptions.

Materials and methods

Study design

The study employed a qualitative-descriptive design. This design is particularly effective in capturing the richness and complexity of the phenomenon being investigated, providing an exhaustive and detailed account without extensive interpretation or theorization [12]. The research adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Table 1) [13].

Table 1
Combined criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ)

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Explanations
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity		
Personal Characteristics		
1. Interviewer/ facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	First researcher conducted the interview.
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g., PhD, MD	First author: Ph.D. Second author: Ph.D.
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	First author: Associate Professor, Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing Second author: Associate Professor, Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	First author: Female Second author: Male
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	Authors have experience in qualitative research, and have qualitative studies.
Relationship with participants		
6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	Participants were students of first author.
7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research?	Students knew that first author was associate professor in psychiatric nursing.
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? e.g. Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	Before data collection, students were informed

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Explanations
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity		
Personal Characteristics		
		about the purpose of the research.
Domain 2: study design		
Theoretical framework		
9. Methodological orientation and Theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	This was a qualitative-descriptive study.
Participant selection		
10. Sampling	How were participants selected? e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	Purposive sampling method was used.
11. Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	Face-to-face interviews were conducted with students.
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	Eighty-nine nursing students were included in the study.
13. Non-participation Setting	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	All the students participated.
14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g., home, clinic, workplace	Data were collected in the classroom.
15. Presence of nonparticipants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	No.
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date	They were nursing students and volunteered to participate in the study.
Data collection		
17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, and guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	Detailed knowledge is given in the data collection section.

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Explanations
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity		
Personal Characteristics		
18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No.
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Interviews forms were used. There is no audio or visual recording.
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	There is no field note.
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	It took approximately 15 minutes for the students to fill out the form.
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	Yes, it was.
23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No.
Domain 3: analysis and findings		
Data analysis		
24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	Two researchers.
25. Description of the coding tree	Did the authors provide a description of the coding tree?	Themes and metaphors have been presented in results and tables.
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	Themed have been identified in results.
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	It has been defined in data analysis.
28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No control.
Reporting		
29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each	Yes, quotations have been presented in results.

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Explanations	
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity			
Personal Characteristics			
	quotation identified? e.g., participant number		
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes, there was.	
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes, they are.	
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or a discussion of minor themes?	Yes, there is.	
Table 2. Metaphors of students regarding theatre activities according to main themes			
Main themes	Metaphors (n)	N	%
Cultivating Empathy Through Theatrical Immersion	Empathizing (12), experiencing the disease (8), life (2), planting a tree (1), seeing the patient (1), sunlight (1), a flashlight (1), washing the car (1), understanding the sick person (1)	28	31.5
Embodying mental illness through theatre	Living the disease (6), mirror (2), rainbow (1), life process (1), drawing (1), dreaming (1), bringing events to light (1), simulation (1), reality (1), television (1), close-up (1), modeling technique (1), cooking (1)	19	21.4
Bridging knowledge and practice	Learning to drive (2), playing games (2), letting a seed blossom (1), experiencing an illness (1), therapy (1), building (1), fishing (1), group work (1), doing puzzles (1), watering the soil (1), educational videos (1), decorating (1), playing a musical instrument (1), becoming a writer (1), social activity (1)	17	19.1
Learning through enjoyment	Playing games (1), watching TV (1), cooking (1), learning by having fun (1), learning about diseases (1), comedy program (1), visual feast (1), permanent information (1), playing taboo (1), playing house (1)	10	11.2
Enhancing knowledge retention through theatre	Role playing (3), learning (1), keeping a diary (1), writing on iron (1), playing games (1), seeds (1), film of the disease (1), story telling (1)	10	11.2
Experiencing a psychiatric ward through theatre	Psychiatric ward (3), hospital environment (1), reading a psychiatrist's notebook (1)	5	5.6
Total		89	100.0

Sample

Purposeful sampling was employed. The population consisted of 93 senior nursing students enrolled in the 2023–2024 fall semester at a state university in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region. Inclusion criteria were being a senior student, enrolled in the mental health and psychiatric nursing course, and participating in the theater activity; non-native Turkish speakers were excluded. The final sample included 89 students. Students formed nine groups of 9–10 members, each assigned a psychiatric disorder topic. Over 14 weeks, they prepared presentations and performed 40–45-minute theater plays. Activities involved portraying patients, illness processes, family environments, and treatment settings while applying therapeutic communication, observation, and interviewing skills. Students worked independently with optional instructor guidance. After each performance, discussions addressed symptoms, treatment, and appropriate practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected between May 10 and June 30 in a classroom setting after all lessons and exams were completed. To reduce hierarchical bias, students were assured participation would not affect grades. Researchers provided oral information, emphasizing voluntariness and the right to withdraw. After written informed consent, forms were distributed. Students received instructions and guiding words for the metaphor task. Anonymous completion took approximately 15–20 minutes.

The Metaphor Determination Form (MDF) was used to collect data on students' theater experiences. Adapted from Saban [14], it was piloted with five students before final use. Sociodemographic data were also gathered. Metaphor-based studies encourage participants to compare themselves with another entity, clarifying the relationship between the metaphor's subject and source [15].

The researchers adapted the MDF through consensus meetings to align it with course objectives and obtained expert feedback from two doctoral-level mental health and psychiatric nursing scholars. After piloting with five students, no revisions were needed. The MDF aimed to capture students' experiences of the theater activity. Participants completed the prompt, "The theater activity applied in the mental health and psychiatric nursing course is like ... because ...," requiring them to generate and justify metaphors. In metaphor research, "like" establishes a link between the subject and source, while "because" elicits the reasoning behind the metaphorical expression [14].

Data Analysis

Metaphor analysis was used to examine students' perceptions of the theater activity, focusing on how they conceptualized and expressed their understanding through metaphorical language [14]. This approach illuminates underlying cognitive and emotional processes by interpreting metaphorical expressions. Data analysis proceed in five stages [16]. First, during the reading phase, students were assigned anonymous codes (e.g., S1, S2), and their metaphors and explanations were repeatedly

reviewed; one incomplete and three non-native responses were excluded. Second, metaphors with similar meanings or emotional tones were grouped into six overarching categories. Third, main themes were generated. Fourth, reliability was assessed using the Miles and Huberman formula $\Delta = C \div (C + \partial) \times 100$; two experts reviewed the data, agreeing on 78 and disagreeing on 11 items, resulting in 87.6% reliability, exceeding the 80% threshold [17]. Finally, data were analyzed in SPSS 25 and presented with descriptive statistics and coded quotations.

Ethics approval statement

The study received ethical approval from the Giresun University Social Sciences and Engineering Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Date: 08.05.2024, No: 05/11). All research procedures adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

In line with Morgan framework, this study strengthened rigor and trustworthiness by transparently detailing data collection and analysis procedures [18]. It employed data, methodological, investigator and theoretical triangulation to enhance credibility, dependability and confirmability. Rather than pursuing a single truth, a crystallization approach foregrounded multiple perspectives within the dataset. Parallel readings across varied data sources and analytic segments deepened contextual understanding and supported a transparent, traceable and methodologically robust research process.

Results

A total of 89 students provided valid data. The mean age was 21.73 ± 0.86 years; 67.4% were female and 32.6% male. Most were single (98.8%), lived in nuclear families (76.3%), and resided in urban areas (63.7%). Metaphor analysis revealed six main themes, summarized in Table 2.

Theme 1: Cultivating Empathy Through Theatrical Immersion

This theme emphasizes the transformative role of theater in fostering empathy toward individuals with mental health conditions. Through performance, students gained insight into lived experiences and described the activity with metaphors such as empathy, immersion, and life, reflecting deep emotional and cognitive engagement with mental health realities.

The theatrical exercise enabled students to metaphorically step into the shoes of individuals with mental health difficulties, offering a powerful perspective on their challenges. One student (S8) stated, "Trying to understand how people with illnesses feel and being like them helped us understand them and how difficult it is." This immersive experience bridged theory and practice, helping students internalize complex conditions. As another student (S38) noted, "When we portray illnesses, we see what people go through... This shows that we need to help them," fostering empathy and support.

The theatrical activity illuminated often-overlooked struggles faced by individuals with mental health challenges, strengthening students' sense of responsibility to support them. One student (S58) stated, "I shed light on the problems and difficulties those people experienced and showed that no one suffers from mental health issues in vain." Creating and enacting scenarios deepened understanding beyond theory, fostering experiential insight. As another student (S70) noted, "Even though we learn about the disease theoretically, when we animate and write the scenario, we feel like we are experiencing the disease and see what difficulties they experience," enhancing awareness and empathy.

Theme 2: Embodying Mental Illness Through Theatre

This theme highlights theater's educational value in enabling experiential understanding of mental illness. Students used metaphors such as experiencing the disease and mirror, viewing theater as a tool to concretize conditions, offering new perspectives and insight into the diversity of mental health disorders. One student (S1) noted, "Just like the rainbow has different colors, diseases have different symptoms. Different roles helped me see those differences." This activity increased students' awareness of individual differences in mental illness, helping them notice previously unrecognized symptoms and better understand the underlying pathology and behavioral manifestations in diverse patients. As one student (S47) explained, "It reflects like a mirror that we encounter these diseases at some point in our lives and that we are not aware of these types of mental disorders and what their symptoms are."

The findings emphasized that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient to fully understand mental health conditions. Students highlighted the importance of role-playing and experiential learning in bridging this gap. One student (S88) stated, "If we had not done a theater activity, we would have evaluated what we read only theoretically, but with this activity, we experienced the events and illnesses... We cannot understand the realities of life by reading." Through theater, students gained insight, experience, empathy, awareness, and competence in mental health care.

Theme 3: Bridging Knowledge and Practice

This theme highlights experiential learning in psychiatric nursing, where theater supports applying theory to practice. Metaphors like driving, games, therapy, building and fishing signify active engagement, repetition, and progressive skill development. One student (S3) stated, "First, it requires a research and knowledge process... With each repetition and rehearsal, the knowledge is reinforced more." This iterative process strengthened understanding, competence, and confidence in applying nursing skills.

The activity helped students practice interactions, observe reactions, and adapt appropriate responses in mental health contexts. One student (S15) stated, "In supporting individuals, role-playing teaches how to cope... I learned the reactions that should be given in different situations." This hands-on experience provided insights beyond classroom instruction. Students also emphasized the need for interactive learning over passive methods. As one student (S19) noted, "When we were told in class, the fish were given to us ready. We learned how to fish by doing theater," highlighting active engagement.

Findings show students prefer integrated, practice-based learning over memorization, enabling them to identify mistakes, improve skills, and better understand theoretical concepts. As one student (S61) noted, "For example, we know the notes of a musical instrument by heart. All the rules are in our minds until we actually play it. When we do only what we know, it allows us to understand how difficult it is and to grasp it better."

Theme 4: Learning Through Enjoyment

This theme highlights learning through enjoyable, interactive theater activities, where game-like metaphors reflect engagement, fostering both learning and psychological flexibility. One student (S2) stated, "Games are a means of entertainment. They are also a means of learning. Through games, we learn, understand, and improve ourselves." Theater created a meaningful and playful context for exploring mental health challenges, supporting skill development, understanding, and engagement in the learning process.

The entertaining aspect of theater enhanced knowledge retention and offered a fresh perspective on mental health care. One student (S24) stated, "It made learning about the condition fun and permanent. It gave a different perspective on the events." By blending enjoyment and education, the activity boosted engagement, motivation, and retention, while fostering self-discovery and strengthening students' confidence in their abilities. One student (S53) noted, "We had fun... and learned what we can do about these challenges." Another (S84) added, "Like children playing house... we addressed psychological challenges and learned while having fun," highlighting meaningful learning through play.

Theme 5: Enhancing Knowledge Retention Through Theatre

This theme highlights theater's role in promoting lasting learning. Metaphors like role-playing, diary keeping, and writing on iron emphasized enduring knowledge and development of essential nursing skills.

Theater introduced alternative learning methods, showing that traditional approaches alone are insufficient for lasting knowledge. Students emphasized the value of active, experiential learning for making information meaningful and permanent. One student (S13) stated, "People do not learn by just studying... It enabled us to learn more permanently by seeing and hearing in different ways." This engagement deepened understanding and improved symptom recognition skills. As one student (S40) noted, "I internalize the condition... Writing on iron is difficult but permanent," highlighting durable and embodied learning.

The activity encouraged students to study, practice, and repeat learning to improve performance, promoting an iterative process of applying knowledge in practice. One student (S62) stated, "Role-playing helped us understand the subject and provided more permanent effects. It's like a practical process." Theater also enabled translation of theoretical knowledge into observable behaviors, creating visual memory. As one student (S80) noted, "It was instructive... to show the symptoms and signs by

role-playing. It also increased the permanence of the information.” This process strengthened understanding and retention through embodied learning.

Theme 6: Experiencing a Psychiatric Ward Through Theatre

This theme shows how theater helped students visualize and immerse in psychiatric ward settings. Metaphors like ward, hospital, and psychiatrist’s notebook reflected experiential understanding and insight into clinical dynamics.

Through theater, students envisioned psychiatric settings firsthand, gaining insight into patients, nurses, therapeutic environments, and communication. One student (S29) stated, “The simulated illnesses were exactly like a psychiatric ward environment... how the nurses there behaved.” This hands-on approach clarified roles and interactions in care settings. Students also understood causes, progression, and treatment of conditions. As one student (S41) noted, “We saw how these conditions started, what patients went through, and how they were treated,” enabling comprehensive understanding of patient experiences and care processes.

Theater revealed psychiatric ward challenges, enabling students to evaluate situations, apply therapeutic interventions, address problems, and develop appropriate solutions. As one student (S87) explained: “We see the details of the condition and the difficulties experienced, and since we are with them during the treatment process, we feel like we are reading the process in a psychiatric notebook.”

Discussion

This study addresses a gap by examining theater-based teaching in psychiatric nursing. Findings show it enhances empathy, understanding, and engagement, bridges theory and practice, improves retention, and provides realistic insight into psychiatric settings, strengthening students’ awareness, practical skills, and readiness for clinical practice.

This study highlights the transformative role of theatrical experiences in fostering empathy among students. Research with adolescents shows that drama activities enhance both cognitive and emotional empathy by enabling participants to embody diverse characters and engage with social situations, including mental health challenges [19]. Similarly, students use vivid metaphors such as “immersion into the illness” and “life itself,” reflecting deep emotional and cognitive engagement [20]. These findings suggest that theater promotes both intellectual understanding and emotional connection.

This study demonstrates that theater activities are a powerful educational tool for understanding mental health and psychiatric disorders in a concrete and experiential way. Drama-based education engages students cognitively and emotionally, deepening learning [21]. Similarly, creative drama training improved communication skills, self-esteem, and empathy among midwifery students, indicating its effectiveness in adult education [22]. Through role-play, case scenarios, and group discussions, drama facilitates not

only knowledge acquisition but also emotional awareness and attitudinal change, effectively “concretizing” mental health concepts [23]. Students also perceive drama as a bridge between theory and real-life experiences, enabling a holistic understanding of patient perspectives [24]. Overall, theater emerges as a multidimensional pedagogical approach that enhances both cognitive and emotional learning.

This study underscores the importance of experiential learning in psychiatric nursing education, showing how theater transforms theoretical knowledge into active practice. Students’ metaphors reflect the integration of cognitive and affective dimensions and highlight students’ active role in learning. Experiential approaches enhance empathy, confidence, and problem-solving, supporting sustainable skill development [25]. Drama-based methods also improve critical thinking, communication, and emotional expression by simulating complex clinical situations [26]. However, effectiveness may vary depending on individual learning styles and prior knowledge, indicating the need to adapt such methods to diverse student needs [27].

Learning through enjoyment highlights the role of interactive activities in student learning. Drama-based methods enhance interaction, motivation, and achievement compared to traditional approaches [28]. Students’ metaphors such as “playing games,” “playing taboo,” and “playing house” show that theater makes learning enjoyable while fostering psychological flexibility and adaptability [29]. These metaphors reflect theater’s dynamic nature, encouraging experimentation and perspective-taking in a safe environment [30]. However, effectiveness may vary depending on individual differences, indicating the need for adaptive designs [31]. In conclusion, theater’s playful nature enriches learning and supports personal and professional development.

The theme of enhancing knowledge retention through theater highlights its role in promoting lasting learning of mental health knowledge among nursing students. Metaphors such as “role-playing,” “keeping a diary,” and “writing on iron” illustrate how theatrical methods embed knowledge and skills deeply. These metaphors reflect active and reflective learning, where role-playing enables embodiment of clinical scenarios, diary-keeping supports self-reflection, and “writing on iron” symbolizes permanence [32,33]. Research shows that simulation- and drama-based methods enhance cognitive and affective learning, improving competence and empathy [30,34]. Active, embodied approaches like theater are more effective than traditional methods in producing durable learning outcomes.

The theme of experiencing a psychiatric ward through theater underscores its effectiveness in helping students visualize and engage with complex clinical settings. Through metaphors such as “a psychiatric ward,” “a hospital environment,” and “reading a psychiatrist’s notebook,” students conveyed a strong sense of presence often absent in traditional learning. Enacting realistic scenarios allowed them to explore emotional and social dynamics, deepening understanding of patient care and ward culture [35]. This aligns with experiential learning theories emphasizing learning through experience and reflection [25]. Theatre-based methods also increase confidence and reduce stigma [36]. Compared to traditional

methods, theater offers a more engaging and practical learning experience, enhancing understanding of psychiatric settings.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to nursing students from a single institution, reducing generalizability. Data relied on self-reported written metaphors, which may lack depth and miss nuances. The qualitative design provided rich insights but did not include quantitative measures to assess outcomes such as empathy or clinical skills. The absence of a control group limited comparisons with traditional methods. Additionally, data were collected at one time point, preventing evaluation of long-term effects. Future research should include larger, diverse samples and mixed-method approaches.

Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the theatre activity implemented in a mental health and psychiatric nursing course through students' metaphors and to reveal their perceptions. Findings showed that theatre enhanced empathy, made mental health experiences visible, integrated theory with practice, and supported enjoyable and lasting learning. It also enabled realistic experiences of psychiatric ward settings and improved psychological flexibility. Accordingly, theatre- and drama-based methods should be effectively used in nursing education and systematically integrated into curricula. Increasing practice-based courses may strengthen communication, clinical decision-making, and student motivation while supporting professional development and self-efficacy in nursing students overall in varied contexts.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate:

The study received ethical approval from the GRU Social Sciences and Engineering Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Date: 08.05.2024, No: 05/11). All research procedures adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Author Contribution

Concept and Design: EBY, JMLM
Data Collection/Literature Search: EBY, JMLM
Analysis and Interpretation of the Data: EBY, JMLM
Preparation of the Article: EBY, JMLM
Approval of the Final Version

Acknowledgement

The authors thank all participants for their contributions.

Data Availability

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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