

Percipience of leadership characteristics in identifying emergent leader

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the leadership characteristics associated with emergent leaders and explored how these characteristics are perceived by administrators and faculty members within an academic context. Guided by a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from 189 respondents drawn from nine satellite campuses of a state university, comprising 54 administrators and 135 faculty members. Quantitative data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire measuring percipience across leadership domains, while qualitative data were obtained through written narrative reflections. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were employed to determine levels of percipience and significant differences between groups, and thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative narratives. The study aimed to describe leadership traits expressed through participants' accounts, determine the level of percipience across key leadership domains, compare perceptions between administrators and faculty members, and identify significant differences in their assessments. Findings revealed that emergent leadership is recognized through consistent ethical conduct, effective communication, relational engagement, and adaptive decision-making rather than formal position alone. Although both groups shared similar views on core leadership attributes, variations emerged in the emphasis placed on delegation, adaptability, and change-oriented behaviors, reflecting differences in professional roles and responsibilities. Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the study developed the LEADWISE integrated leadership framework, which explains leadership emergence as a dynamic and relational process shaped by leadership traits, wisdom, integrity, social engagement, and ethical awareness. The study contributes to leadership research by offering an empirically grounded framework that supports leadership identification and development in complex organizational settings, particularly within higher education institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The identification of emergent leaders has gained increasing scholarly attention as leadership is widely understood as a socially constructed and relational process rather than a function of formal authority alone. In contemporary organizations, particularly during periods of uncertainty and transition, leadership

emerges through shared identity, collective sense-making, and group-based influence. A social identity approach to leadership explains that leaders are recognized and legitimized when they are perceived as representing shared group values and norms [1]. In higher education institutions, where collaboration and collegiality are central, this recognition process raises an important evaluative question: how are leadership characteristics systematically identified and assessed across organizational roles?

Despite advances in leadership theory, significant challenges persist in how leadership is evaluated and selected within higher education settings. External pressures such as performance metrics, governance reforms, and global ranking systems have reshaped leadership practices, often prioritizing strategic positioning over evidence-based identification of leadership effectiveness [2]. Institutions frequently rely on formal credentials and administrative compliance, while lacking structured approaches for assessing perceptual and relational indicators of leadership. Consequently, leadership selection and development processes may not be grounded in systematic evaluation of how leadership is recognized and validated by administrators and faculty members.

Recent empirical research has identified leadership competencies that combine knowledge, skills, and attitudes in higher education contexts, including communication, self-awareness, adaptability, and ethical conduct [3]. Earlier studies similarly emphasized fairness, sound judgment, transparency, and resilience in fostering trust and organizational stability [4]. While these findings clarify what effective leadership entails, they offer limited guidance on how such characteristics are comparatively evaluated across institutional groups or how perception of these characteristics informs leadership identification.

Leadership emergence theory explains how leaders arise through interactions between individual attributes, group processes, and contextual factors [5]. Integrative reviews demonstrate that leadership emergence depends on how leadership behaviors are enacted and interpreted within groups [6]. This perspective underscores the need for evaluative approaches that examine leadership characteristics not only conceptually but through measurable perceptions and comparative assessment within organizational contexts.

Social identity-based leadership research shows that leaders gain acceptance when perceived as prototypical and morally aligned with group values [7]. Followers' reactions are shaped by judgments of fairness, morality, and ethical consistency, which influence leadership legitimacy and behavioral outcomes [8]. However, limited research within higher education has integrated qualitative insights with quantitative evaluation to systematically assess how leadership characteristics are perceived across administrators and faculty members. The absence of such integrative evaluation frameworks constrains institutions' ability to identify emergent leaders through evidence-based processes rather than informal recognition alone.

Accordingly, this study addresses this evaluative gap by examining how leadership characteristics are assessed, compared, and interpreted within a higher education institution. Specifically, the study aims to: i) describe the leadership characteristics associated with emergent leaders as expressed by administrators and faculty members; ii) determine the level of perception of both groups regarding leadership characteristics in terms of personal traits, self-awareness, communication, delegation, agility and adaptability, cultivation of wisdom, and effecting change; iii) compare the perception of administrators and faculty members across these domains; and iv) develop an integrated leadership identification framework grounded in combined qualitative and quantitative evaluation. The study is guided by the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches in systematically evaluating leadership emergence within higher education.

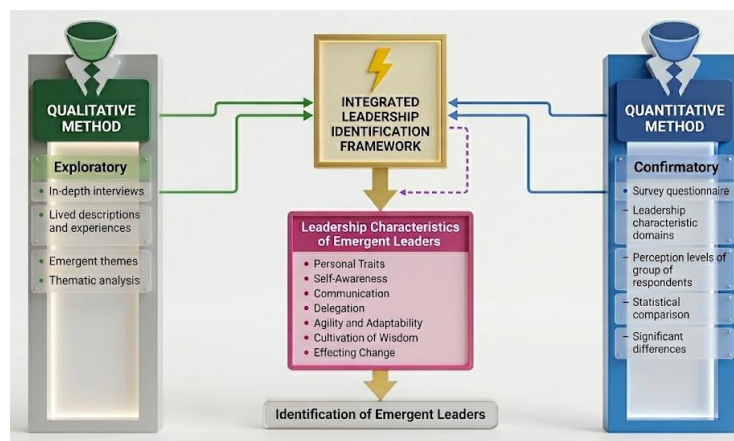


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Leadership as a socially constructed and identity-based process

Leadership is increasingly understood as a social process shaped by shared identity, interaction, and collective meaning rather than formal authority alone. Leaders gain influence when they are perceived as representing group values and aspirations. Hou *et al.* [9] found that identity-based leadership enhances team performance by strengthening group pride, while Wu *et al.* [10] showed that informal leadership emerges through social-cognitive processes aligned with group norms rather than positional power. These findings highlight leadership as a product of social recognition and validation.

This relational perspective is particularly relevant during organizational change. In higher education, leadership effectiveness depends on aligning institutional goals with shared values and engaging academic staff. Jinga *et al.* [11] demonstrated that leadership behaviors shape employee responses to change through communication, style, and participation, while the social identity perspective explains that leaders emerge when seen as representative of the group and capable of advancing collective interests [12]. Together, the evidence affirms leadership as constructed through interaction, shared identity, and collective endorsement rather than formal designation.

2.2. Institutional pressures and leadership identification in higher education

Leadership identification in higher education is increasingly shaped by institutional pressures arising from governance reforms, accountability demands, and periods of disruption. Effective governance structures play a critical role in influencing how leadership is recognized and legitimized within universities, as they set expectations for transparency, participation, and performance-based decision making [13]. At the same time, the evolving landscape of educational leadership research reflects a growing emphasis on systemic influences, showing that leadership identification is closely tied to institutional priorities, research trends, and shifting policy environments [14]. These pressures become even more pronounced during disruptive contexts, where leaders are expected to respond swiftly to uncertainty while maintaining academic standards and organizational stability. In such situations, leadership identification is influenced not only by formal roles but also by leaders' capacity to navigate change, manage assessment and accountability demands, and provide direction under constrained conditions [15]. Collectively, these studies highlight that leadership in higher education emerges at the intersection of institutional structures, external pressures, and leaders' adaptive responses to complex organizational challenges.

2.3. Core leadership competencies in higher education contexts

Core leadership competencies in higher education increasingly center on relational, ethical, and adaptive capacities that enable leaders to navigate complex academic environments. Inclusive leadership is particularly critical, as it fosters extra-role behaviors, organizational learning, and shared responsibility by promoting openness, participation, and continuous improvement [16]. In the digital era, effective leadership also requires strategic vision, adaptability, and the ability to guide institutions through technological change while aligning digital initiatives with institutional goals and academic values [17]. Moral integrity and professional competence further underpin leadership credibility, especially in research-intensive universities where ethical judgment and managerial effectiveness are essential for gaining faculty trust [18]. Together, these perspectives show that leadership competence in higher education extends beyond technical expertise to encompass inclusivity, moral credibility, and adaptive responsiveness to evolving institutional demands.

2.4. Leadership emergence as a multi-level and dynamic phenomenon

Leadership emergence is increasingly viewed as a dynamic, multi-level process shaped by individual attributes, interpersonal interactions, and organizational contexts. Rather than resulting from formal position alone, leadership develops through ongoing social processes in which individuals gain influence by responding to situational demands and being recognized by others. Hanna *et al.* [19] describe leadership emergence as adaptive and evolving, arising from the interaction of personal capabilities, relationships, and contextual conditions, with development shaped by continuous feedback between individuals and their environments. Similarly, Xu *et al.* [20] show that shared leadership emerges through adaptive team processes in which roles shift according to task needs, expertise, and relational dynamics. Together, these perspectives highlight leadership emergence as fluid, distributed, and grounded in interaction, adaptability, and social recognition within changing organizational settings.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine the perception of leadership characteristics in identifying emergent leaders. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive

evaluation of leadership emergence. This design allowed the study to combine measurable indicators with contextual insights, strengthening validity and interpretive depth in higher education settings where leadership identification involves both structured assessment and relational judgment [21], [22]. The overall research process is illustrated in Figure 2.

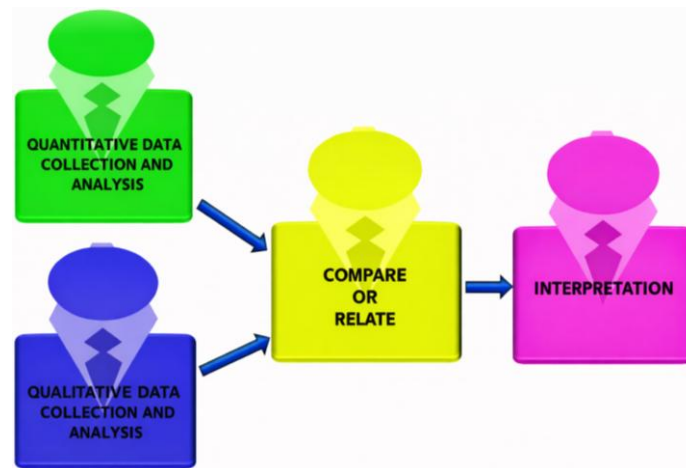


Figure 2. Convergent parallel study design

3.1. Participants and sampling

The participants of the study consisted of 189 respondents from nine satellite campuses of Romblon State University in the Province of Romblon. These respondents were grouped into 54 administrators and 135 faculty members. The administrator group included 20 department heads or chairpersons, 20 program coordinators, 8 directors, and 6 deans. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who had direct involvement in leadership practices and institutional decision-making [23]. This approach ensured that the respondents possessed sufficient experience and engagement within the university to provide informed and meaningful evaluative assessments of leadership characteristics and leadership emergence within the institutional context.

3.2. Data collection

Data for the quantitative and qualitative strands were collected concurrently. The quantitative component used a structured survey measuring respondents' perception of leadership characteristics linked to emergent leadership, including personal traits, self-awareness, communication, delegation, adaptability, wisdom, and effecting change. These domains were drawn from established leadership and higher education competency literature [3], [4], with content validity strengthened through expert review to ensure clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness.

The qualitative component consisted of written narratives in which participants interpreted leadership emergence within their institutional setting. While not capturing real-time interaction, this approach enabled reflective and organization-wide evaluation under consistent conditions. Simultaneous collection ensured equal priority for both strands and minimized temporal bias, consistent with mixed-methods principles of complementarity and balance [21], [22]. Integrating survey results with participants' narratives allowed quantitative patterns to be interpreted alongside evaluative reasoning, enhancing contextual depth and reducing surface-level statistical interpretation.

3.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine levels of perception and independent samples t-tests to examine statistically significant differences between administrators and faculty members across leadership domains. These procedures supported comparative institutional evaluation of leadership characteristics. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning related to leadership characteristics and leadership emergence. Attention was given to both code saturation and meaning saturation to ensure analytic adequacy, with meaning saturation achieved when no new conceptual insights emerged from additional narratives [24]. While written narratives may limit direct observation of leadership interactions, thematic analysis enabled identification of the evaluative criteria participants used in

recognizing leadership within their institutional context. Integration of quantitative results with qualitative themes strengthened explanatory validity by linking statistical differences to participants' interpretive accounts of leadership practice.

3.4. Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings

Integration occurred at the interpretation phase, where qualitative themes were examined alongside quantitative results to identify convergence, complementarity, and divergence. This integrative process transformed separate data strands into a coherent evaluative account of leadership identification, consistent with core mixed-methods principles [22]. Figure 3 illustrates how qualitative reflections and quantitative measures jointly informed the identification of core leadership dimensions, including traits and self-awareness, communication and delegation, adaptability and wisdom, and the capacity to effect change. These dimensions were synthesized into an integrated framework for identifying emergent leaders. The interpretation was further informed by leadership emergence theory, which conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic and multi-level process shaped by individual characteristics, social interactions, and contextual influences [19]. Through this integrated analysis, the study produced a comprehensive and context-sensitive evaluation of how leadership characteristics are recognized and assessed within higher education.

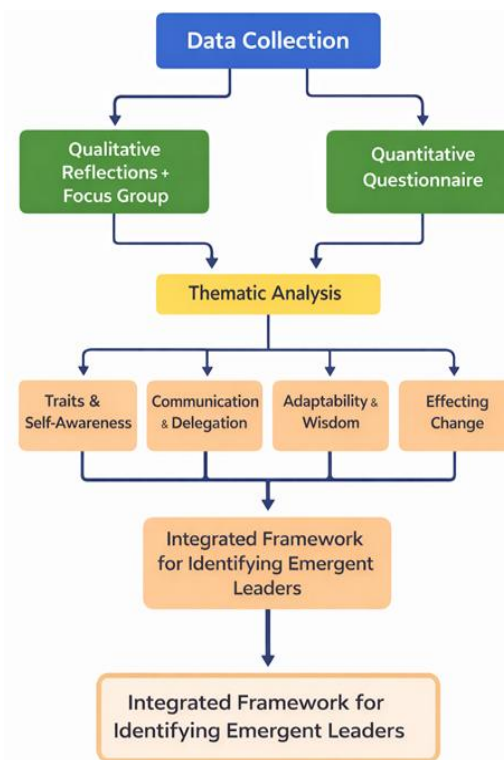


Figure 3. Integrated framework for identifying emergent leaders

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an integrated analysis of the quantitative and qualitative findings addressing the study objective on the percipience of leadership characteristics in identifying emergent leaders. In this study, percipience refers to the level of awareness, recognition, and evaluative understanding of leadership characteristics that signal leadership emergence within an institutional context. Quantitative data were examined using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative evidence from written narrative reflections provided contextual explanation of how leadership characteristics are recognized in practice. The convergence of these strands enabled a more comprehensive interpretation of leadership emergence grounded in both measurable perceptions and lived professional experience.

4.1. Leadership characteristics associated with emergent leaders

Table 1 indicates that both administrators and faculty view leadership emergence as developing through daily interactions, shared values, and responses to challenges rather than formal position alone.

Participants described leadership as demanding, requiring patience, sound judgment, and fairness. The emphasis on transparency and moral grounding suggests that leaders gain recognition through trust and ethical conduct. This reflects the relational nature of leadership, where individuals are acknowledged because they foster shared purpose and emotional connection. Ethical behavior and clear communication thus function as social signals that promote cooperation and acceptance, consistent with findings that shared identity strengthens collaborative behavior [25], [26].

However, the narratives also show that relational qualities alone are insufficient. Faculty highlighted decisiveness, adaptability, and sociability, indicating that leaders must also demonstrate competence and confidence in changing situations. Leadership emergence therefore reflects a balance between relatability and capability. Harms *et al.* [27] similarly argue that individuals emerge as leaders when perceived as both similar to others and capable of guiding them. These findings suggest that institutions should assess leadership not only through formal credentials but through observable fairness, communication, adaptability, and decision-making in everyday practice.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of leadership characteristics

Theme	Subtheme	Representative narratives
Leadership as a challenging role	Resilience in leadership	“Leadership is not easy. It involves challenges that test patience and strength, especially when decisions affect many people.” (A1, A3)
Leadership identification as a deliberate process	Careful leader selection	“Selecting leaders should be done carefully to ensure that those chosen are capable of leading responsibly.” (A2)
Ethical foundations of leadership	Fairness and impartiality	“Fairness is essential in identifying leaders, and personal preferences should never influence the process.” (A1, A4)
Transparency in leadership processes	Absence of bias	“Bias has no place in leadership identification. Everyone must be evaluated using the same standards.” (A3)
Communication as a core leadership attribute	Clear and open communication	“Leaders must communicate clearly so that directions are understood and concerns are heard.” (A2, F1)
Decision-making competence	Sound judgment	“Leadership decisions should be based on clear criteria rather than emotions.” (A4)
Adaptive leadership capacity	Agility and adaptability	“A leader must think quickly and adjust when situations change.” (F2, F4)
Interpersonal competence	Sociability and approachability	“Social skills matter because leaders deal with different people every day.” (F3)
Openness to change	Receptiveness to improvement	“Leaders should be open to new frameworks that improve leadership identification.” (A2, F1)

4.2. Level of percipience of both groups regarding leadership characteristics

Figure 4 shows both convergence and variation in how administrators and faculty perceive leadership characteristics associated with emergent leaders. High percipience in personal traits, communication, and self-awareness indicates shared recognition of foundational leadership qualities based on interpersonal engagement rather than formal authority. This aligns with Harms *et al.* [27] who emphasize the role of relational and similarity-based factors in leader emergence.

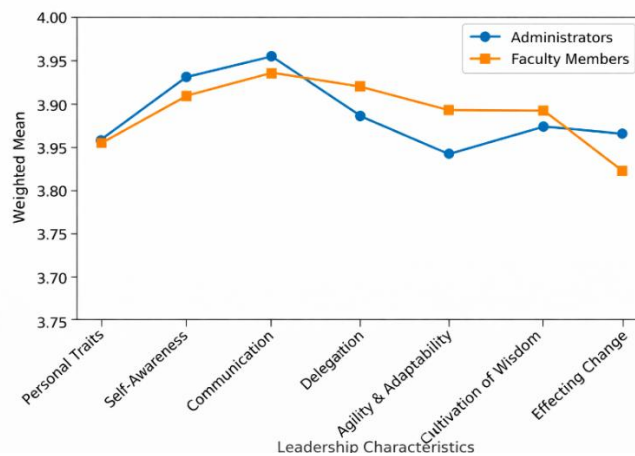


Figure 4. Level of percipience of administrators and faculty members on leadership characteristics associated with emergent leaders

However, differences appear in delegation, adaptability, cultivation of wisdom, and effecting change, where administrators reported higher percipience. These domains are more visible in managerial roles and reflect strategic and decision-oriented responsibilities. Nordin [28] similarly notes that leadership competencies are experienced unevenly across academic roles, which can shape perception levels. Giannella *et al.* [29] further argue that leadership recognition depends on moral judgment and perceived prototypicality, suggesting that attributes such as wisdom and change orientation gain acceptance only when aligned with followers' contextual expectations. These disparities highlight the need for more transparent and inclusive leadership evaluation processes across academic roles.

4.3. Comparison of administrators' and faculty members' percipience across leadership characteristic domains

Table 2 shows a generally high alignment between administrators and faculty members in their percipience of leadership characteristics. Both groups rated personal traits, communication, and self-awareness similarly, indicating a shared understanding of effective leadership shaped by common institutional norms and experiences rather than position alone. As Zhou and Deneen [30] suggest, individuals within the same organizational context often develop comparable views due to shared policies and professional interactions.

However, differences emerged across certain domains. Administrators placed greater emphasis on delegation, adaptability, and effecting change, which are more visible in managerial roles. Faculty members tended to view leadership through instructional and collegial interactions, resulting in slightly different emphases. Previous studies [31], [32] note that leadership perceptions in higher education are context- and role-dependent, making such variations expected. These findings indicate that leadership identification processes should consider both shared institutional values and role-based perspectives to support a balanced evaluation of emergent leadership.

Table 2. T-test analysis of the percipience of the two groups of respondents

Leadership characteristics	Mean difference	t-value	p-value p=0.05	Remarks
Personal traits	0.0059	0.220	0.826	NS
Self-awareness	0.0226	1.642	0.102	NS
Communication	0.0215	1.538	0.126	NS
Delegation	-0.0426	-2.296	0.023	S
Agility and adaptability	-0.0585	-2.479	0.040	S
Cultivation of wisdom	-0.0156	-0.676	0.500	NS
Effect change	0.0600	2.206	0.030	S

Note: NS=not significant; S=significant at $p<0.05$.

The LEADWISE integrated leadership framework conceptualizes leadership emergence as a relational and multi-layered process in which individual capacities, contextual demands, and ethical orientations converge, as in Figure 5. At its foundation, leadership traits (L) emphasize personal dispositions such as credibility, competence, and self-awareness. Leadership traits are socially interpreted, as leaders are recognized not only by what they possess but by how their actions and intentions are perceived over time [33]. Ethical leadership research further clarifies that legitimacy is grounded in moral conduct and value consistency rather than fixed individual characteristics [34]. A distributed leadership perspective strengthens this base by highlighting empowerment, role identity, and shared responsibility as drivers of leadership emergence [35].

Building on this foundation, the framework highlights relational practices that make leadership visible, particularly effecting change (E), articulation and communication (A), and delegation and distributed trust (D). Leadership under uncertainty demonstrates that strategic delegation, direction-setting, and adaptive practices reinforce legitimacy and performance [36]. Evidence also shows that recognized leadership traits evolve across contexts, supporting the view that emergence is shaped by both personal qualities and situational expectations [37].

The lower dimensions, wisdom and adaptability (W), integrity and transparency (I), social and relational engagement (S), and ethical and emotional awareness (E), reflect the moral and contextual depth of leadership. Contemporary leadership research emphasizes adaptability, emotional awareness, and relational sensitivity in complex environments [38]. Studies on leader emergence further underscore the need to explain how leadership is recognized through interaction and contextual judgment rather than position alone [39], [40]. To operationalize the framework, institutions may align LEADWISE domains with leadership development, performance review, and mentoring systems by using behavioral indicators for each dimension, integrating peer and supervisor feedback, and embedding reflective leadership tasks in training programs. This allows leadership identification to move from abstract traits to observable practices that inform selection, development, and succession planning.

LEADWISE Integrated Leadership Framework



Figure 5. Integrated leadership framework

4.4. Implications

The findings suggest that leadership identification in academic settings should move beyond position-based or trait-only assessments toward an integrated, behavior- and relationship-centered approach. The LEADWISE framework shows that emergent leaders are recognized through personal qualities, communication, ethical grounding, adaptability, and the ability to build trust and shared responsibility. Institutions should therefore design leadership programs, evaluation systems, and mentoring practices that promote reflective judgment, ethical awareness, collaboration, and change-oriented action, fostering environments where leadership is recognized through collective validation rather than formal designation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that emergent leadership is a multidimensional and socially constructed process shaped by individual characteristics, relational influence, and contextual demands. Both administrators and faculty consistently associate emergent leaders with strong personal traits, ethical awareness, effective communication, adaptability, and the ability to effect change, although differences in perception reflect role-based experiences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that leadership identification extends beyond formal authority and is grounded in sustained behaviors that build trust and collaboration.

The LEADWISE integrated leadership framework provides an empirically grounded model explaining how leadership traits, wisdom, integrity, social engagement, and ethical awareness support systematic leader identification in higher education. By framing leadership emergence as an evaluative process, the study contributes a context-sensitive approach that can inform leadership development and institutional assessment practices. Future research may validate the framework across diverse settings, employ longitudinal or observational designs to examine leadership interactions, and further refine evaluative instruments to strengthen evidence-based leadership assessment.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this publication. The study was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the results or interpretations.

INFORMED CONSENT

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. They were briefed on the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality. The research adhered to established ethical standards for studies involving human participants.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All participants gave their consent prior to participation, and their identities were kept confidential. They were also advised that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any consequence.

DATA AVAILABILITY




Data used in this study may be obtained from the corresponding author upon justified request. Access to detailed qualitative materials is limited in order to maintain participant privacy and confidentiality.

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