

POWERING GEN Z AT WORK: THE PSYCAP–PERFORMANCE LINK AND THE GENERATIONAL TWIST

Zuraidah Sipon^{1*}, Muhammad Majid², Norshahniza Sahari³, Atik Djajanti⁴, A. Dewantoro Marsono⁵

¹²³*Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Johor Segamat Campus, 85000 Segamat, Johor, Malaysia*

⁴⁵*Postgraduate School, Perbanas Institute, Jakarta, Indonesia 12940*

*Corresponding Author

Email: ¹zurai973@uitm.edu.my, ²muhdmajid@uitm.edu.my, ³norsh239@uitm.edu.my, ⁴atik@perbanas.id, ⁵admarsono@perbanas.id

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ABSTRACT

The performance of the workforce is crucial in determining what makes an organisation stand out. Despite the current increase in enthusiasm for Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as an innovative method for enhancing employee job performance, this research domain has garnered minimal focus concerning Generation Z (Gen Z). The prevalence of stress and anxiety among Gen Z, the youngest employment group, raises numerous issues regarding their work performance. Despite comprehensive discourse in recent research, comprehending their influence on Gen Z's work performance and the fundamental mechanisms remains constrained. This empirical study investigates the impact of Gen Z's traits on the connection between PsyCap and work performance. A purposive sampling method was employed, and primary data were collected from 167 Gen Z employees in the banking sector across Malaysia using a self-administered questionnaire. The data was subsequently analysed via SmartPLS 4.0, and it was found that the direct effect was supported while the indirect effect was not supported. The findings contribute to the theory and practice by understanding generational traits as the fundamental mechanism.

Keywords: Psychological Capital, Work Performance, Generational Traits, Gen Z

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Economic growth and national competitiveness are closely tied to employee performance. High-performing employees contribute to GDP through increased productivity, innovation, and consumer spending. Enhanced job stability, income levels, and disposable income further support economic development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Therefore, understanding the factors that influence employee performance is essential for sustaining long-term growth. As the workforce continues to evolve, the emergence of Generation Z introduces a new dynamic that warrants attention. This generation, now entering and reshaping the labour market, brings distinct traits and expectations that can significantly impact organizational performance and broader economic outcomes. Known for their digital fluency and adaptability, Gen Z offers valuable innovation and technical skills that drive digital transformation

across industries. Having come of age during periods of global instability, such as the aftermath of 9/11 and the Great Recession, Gen Z presents both opportunities and challenges for organizations (McKee-Ryan, 2021). Their technological proficiency enhances customer service and overall organizational efficiency. However, effectively integrating Gen Z into the workforce requires leaders to understand their unique characteristics, values, and behaviours (Schroth, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified stress levels among Gen Z workers. According to Deloitte's 2023 survey, 42% of Malaysian Gen Z respondents and 46% globally report frequent anxiety, with over 40% expressing concern about their mental health. Burnout, in turn, increases psychological strain and the intention to leave an organization (Hadi & Adriansyah, 2023). Psychological Capital (PsyCap), which includes hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, has significantly influenced employee performance (Luthans et al., 2015). Wu and Nguyen (2019) further showed that PsyCap's impact varies by demographic factors such as age, gender, and job tenure. While past studies have explored constructs such as work ethics, person-job fit, and PsyCap, limited research has examined how the unique characteristics of Gen Z may moderate the relationship between psychological resources and performance outcomes. Moreover, existing literature has largely focused on Western contexts; early studies on Gen Z were predominantly U.S.-based, which limits their generalizability to culturally diverse regions (Scholz, 2019). Given that Gen Z's values, motivations, and stressors may differ significantly across cultural and technological landscapes, there is a pressing need for context-specific research.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of psychological capital in influencing employee performance among Malaysian Gen Z workers, while also investigating how Gen Z-specific traits moderate this relationship. By addressing this gap, the research seeks to contribute to a more culturally grounded understanding of Gen Z's workplace dynamics and offer practical insights for organizations aiming to retain and empower this emerging workforce segment (Leslie et al., 2021). Following variable conceptualisation and research framework, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations are offered.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Job Performance

Staff performance affects output, efficiency, and business results, determining corporate success. Understanding performance-enhancing elements is essential to excellence. Motowidlo et al. (2014) defined job performance as behavioural, episodic, evaluative, and multidimensional. They propose that job performance is the sum of individual behavioural occurrences across time. Differentiating task-specific competencies from contextual skills is crucial to this idea. Task performance includes meeting deadlines and working accurately and efficiently (Albert, 2022). Effectiveness and precision are used to evaluate it concerning an employee's official job requirements (Koopmans et al., 2014). Ability and motivation affect task performance, according to a few authors (Corbeanu & Iliescu, 2023; Edgar et al., 2021; Setyawati et al., 2023). The formal job description does not include contextual performance, which supports an organization's overall functioning (Landy et al., 2017). This involves aiding co-workers, taking on extra tasks, and organisational citizenship. These behaviours improve organisational performance beyond task completion. Palenzuela et al. (2019) linked contextual performance, work quality, and employee well-being. Telecommuting, tenure, HRM methods, and organisational climate have been researched for their effects on employee performance in Malaysia (Ishak et al., 2022). Improving

productivity, innovation, and sustainable growth requires understanding and regulating task and contextual performance.

2.2 Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

Luthans et al. (2007) defined Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a positive psychological state that includes hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. Grounded in theory and research, PsyCap is measurable, cultivable, and consistently linked to favourable workplace outcomes (Luthans, 2002a; 2002b). Each component has been independently validated as a psychological resource (Snyder, 2000, as cited in Lin et al., 2023). PsyCap is widely regarded as a valuable asset in organizations, enhancing both individual and organizational performance, and is seen as a sustainable source of competitive advantage in dynamic business environments (Goswami & Goswami, 2023). PsyCap, or HERO, has been shown to boost job performance by fostering positive workplace behaviours, reducing negative actions, and alleviating stress (Hsu et al., 2014; Abbas & Raja, 2015; Kryshchanovych et al., 2022; Brunetto et al., 2022). Georgiou et al. (2022) further demonstrated that PsyCap training improves job search efforts and employment outcomes for job seekers. In Malaysia, PsyCap has garnered increasing academic attention, especially concerning its impact on employee well-being and organisational success (Othman, 2021; Alias et al., 2020; Abdullah & Sabri, 2022). Al-Abrar et al. (2023) emphasised its importance in the social welfare sector, while Hassian et al. (2022) confirmed its role in enhancing organizational performance. However, PsyCap research in Malaysia has largely focused on education, hospitality, and the public sector, highlighting a gap in both theoretical and empirical studies and suggesting the need for broader research across various sectors.

2.3 Generational Traits

Societal changes and individual growth shape generational traits, shared attitudes, values, and behaviours influenced by major life events (Barak, 2022; Millová et al., 2021). These attributes can guide professional engagement and education (Syed & Nguyen, 2021). Generational factors affect job performance. In teams with high average DJE and low variance, developmental work experience (DJE) improves performance through information-seeking and support, according to Cao and Hamori (2023). The effects of age differences on workplace attitudes and behaviours are unclear (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Aggarwal et al. (2023) noted that HR approaches like flexible work arrangements, recognition, reward, and feedback can improve Gen Z job satisfaction and performance, but further research is needed. PsyCap is also shaped by younger employees' adaptation and resilience in constantly changing social and economic circumstances (Xin, 2022). It positively affects performance and well-being and negatively affects stress and insecurity (Cai et al., 2019). Generational qualities affect PsyCap, which influences employment results, emphasising the need for supportive leadership and resource-rich workplaces.

2.4 Underpinning Theory, Hypothesis, and Research Model

This investigation is based on two fundamental theories. The Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) Theory elucidates the relationship between job satisfaction and productivity (Bakker et al., 2007), whereas the Generational Theory, conceived by Karl Mannheim in 1952, posits that individuals who grow up during the same historical epoch—termed their "generational location"—cultivate a collective social consciousness influenced by pivotal events. This study employs Generational Theory to examine the impact of generational factors on PsyCap and occupational performance. Based on the discussion, this study hypothesises that generational traits moderate the relationship between PsyCap and Gen Z work performance. The research model is in Figure 1.

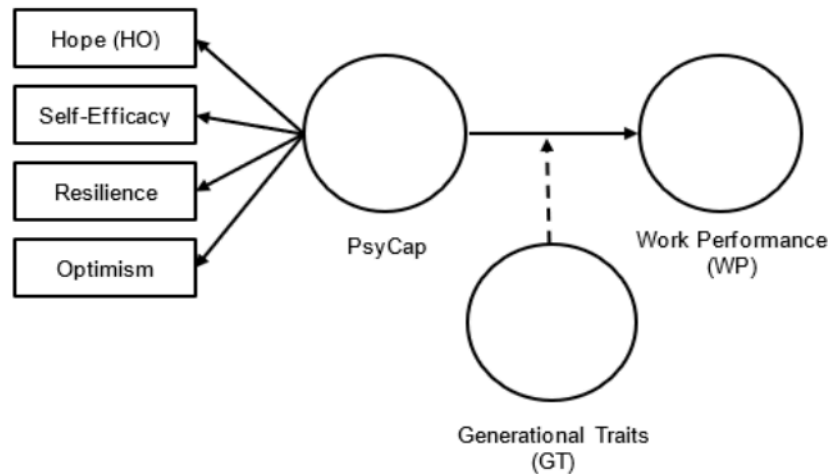


Fig. 1 Research Model
(Source: SmartPLS 4.0)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The data was collected from Gen Z bankers in Malaysia through a self-administered questionnaire. The sample size was established using G*power (Green, 1991) with the following parameters: A sample size of 68 was required to assess this model, with a medium f^2 of 0.15, an α of 0.05, two predictors, and 80% power. Purposive sampling was employed, and the individuals were contacted over LinkedIn. Respondents were classified into the North, Central, South, East Coast, and East Malaysia Regions to improve population representation. Section A had demographic data, Section B presented work performance data, Section C provided PsyCap data, and Section D showcased generational traits data. Work performance measurements were obtained from Koopmas et al. (2014), PsyCap assessments from Luthans et al. (2007), and generational traits from Dolot (2018). Participants assessed diverse subjects utilising a five-point Likert scale, work performance via a seven-point Likert scale, and generational attributes through a six-point Likert scale. During four months, 209 responses were collected, yielding 181 valid data points for the study following data screening and cleaning.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Partial Least Squares (PLS) was employed to examine the study model using SmartPLS 4.0 (Ringle et al., 2024). The validity and reliability of the reflective measurement model were assessed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Subsequently, we analysed the structural model to validate the proposed associations. This study conducted path coefficient and loading relevance bootstraps with 10,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2022). Before advancing to the structural model, the analysis focused on the first and second-order measurement models, since HERO represents the dimensions of PsyCap.

4.1 Measurement Model Analysis

The study model was designed as a higher-order construct (HOC) reflective-reflective measurement model.

4.1.1 Lower-Order Measurement Model

During the LOC measurement model phase, each LOC was associated with its observable indicators. This study identified a correlation between HO, SE, RE, and OP (dimensions of PsyCap) and Work Performance (WP). Table 1 demonstrates that the composite reliability (CR) of all constructs, ranging from 0.800 to 0.918, remains above the acceptable threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2022) both before and after the removal of indicators with inadequate outer loadings. The results indicate that reliability is not a concern in the LOC measuring methodology of this study.

Table 1. Internal Consistency and Convergent Validity Before and After Deletion of Items (LOC)

Construct	Before Deletion of Items		After Deletion of Items	
	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
WP	0.909	0.441	0.910	0.504
HO	0.918	0.652	0.918	0.652
SE	0.879	0.549	0.879	0.550
RE	0.891	0.579	0.891	0.579
OP	0.847	0.490	0.865	0.565
GT	0.816	0.249	0.800	0.573

Table 1 shows that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for WP, OP, and GT exceeded the 0.5 threshold (Hair et al., 2022) following the removal of indicators with inadequate outer loadings, with AVE values ranging from 0.504 to 0.652. The results meet the threshold proposed for the AVE, so concluding that the LOC measurement model in this study possesses convergent validity.

Table 2. HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) of LOC Measurement Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. WP						
2. HO	0.690					
3. SE	0.778	0.784				
4. RE	0.645	0.669	0.885			
5. OP	0.689	0.804	0.878	0.809		
6. GT	0.677	0.554	0.759	0.715	0.734	

Henseler et al. (2015) propose the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio for discriminant validity. This ensures that model constructs are distinct. Table 2 shows the LOC Measurement Model's HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio), which shows that SE–RE and OP–SE have significant correlations with HTMT values of 0.885 and 0.878, respectively, which are below the 0.90 threshold but close to it. SE–RE and OP–SE may not be considerably different based on these values. The HTMT inference (bootstrapping confidence intervals) was used to determine if the upper bounds were below 0.85 or 0.90 to confirm these findings. Discriminant validity is absent when the HTMT confidence interval upper bounds surpass 0.85 or 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). Since the upper level (UL) HTMT 95% confidence intervals did not surpass 0.85 or 0.90, the LOC assessment model's discriminant validity is confirmed by this study.

4.1.2 Higher-Order Measurement Model

Higher-order constructs (HOC) and hierarchical component models in PLS-SEM (Lohmöller, 2013; Sarstedt et al., 2021) allow the specification of a singular construct at an abstract level and more concrete subdimensions simultaneously. This study uses reflective indicators to assess hope (HO), self-efficacy (SE), resilience (RE), and optimism (OP) and proposes PsyCap as the higher-order construct (HOC) generated from them. HOC modelling increases parsimony and reduces model complexity, according to Hair et al. (2022). After completing all LOC assessment model operations, the PLS method was used to calculate HO, SE, RE, and OP latent variable scores. The latent variable scores indicate PsyCap—the higher-order construct. The measuring model was re-executed for higher-order construct assessment.

Standardised outside loadings should be 0.708 or above (Hair et al., 2022). According to Hulland (1999), social science research often has lower outer loadings (<0.70), particularly when using novel scales. Thus, indicators with outer loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 should only be eliminated if they improve internal consistency reliability or convergent validity above the threshold value. The investigation found most markers above 0.7, including HOC indications. TP_4 (0.618), CP_8 (0.649), and GC_2 (0.695) have outer loadings below 0.7, however, the researcher kept them in the model because they do not alter the AVE value. The outer loadings of HOC indicators range from 0.618 (TP_4) to 0.911 (SE). These findings confirm the HOC measurement model's indication of dependability.

Table 3. Internal Consistency Reliability (HOC)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
WP	0.890	0.891	0.910	0.504
PsyCap	0.898	0.902	0.929	0.766
GT	0.624	0.628	0.800	0.573

This study's composite dependability (rho_c) is shown in Table 3 and ranges from 0.800 (GT) to 0.929 (PsyCap). No constructs exceed the range. These findings suggest that the HOC measurement model in this study does not have internal consistency or dependability issues. AVEs range from 0.504 (WP) to 0.766 (PsyCap), above Hair et al. (2022)'s 0.5 criterion. Convergent validity is found in this study's HOC measurement methodology. The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio was recalculated at the HOC level to determine HOC discriminant validity. The HTMT of the HOC Measurement Model shows that most structures meet the HTMT<0.85 criteria (see Table 4). This study proved the HOC measurement model's discriminant validity.

Table 4. HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) of the HOC Measurement Model

	1	2	3
1. WP			
2. PsyCap	0.783		
3. GT	0.677	0.770	

The measurement model was evaluated for instrument validity and reliability using Hair et al. (2022) and Ramayah et al. (2018) criteria, following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step methodology. For this study, the LOC and HOC measurement models give reliable convergent and discriminant validity. Next, the structural model was evaluated for hypothesis testing.

4.2 Structural Model Analysis

Subsequently, the assessment of the structural model results occurs once the validity and reliability of the construct measurements have been confirmed. Hair et al. (2022) assert that the structural model is primarily assessed based on its explanatory and predictive capabilities rather than its goodness-of-fit.

4.2.1 Collinearity (VIF)

The initial phase of the structural model involves evaluating collinearity concerns. The assessment criterion is 5 according to Hair et al. (2022) or 3.3 according to Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2006). This investigation reveals that the inner VIF values for the constructions range from 1.210 (GC_6) to 3.262 (HO_3), both of which are below the threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2022). Consequently, these results suggest that collinearity is not a significant issue in our investigation.

4.2.2 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hair et al. (2022) suggested using the bootstrapping method on a resample of 10,000 to check the R^2 , beta (β), and t-values that go with the structural model. It is also helpful to report the bootstrap confidence interval because it gives more information about how stable a coefficient estimate is and how important the parameter is (Hair et al., 2022). They further advised that in addition to these essential metrics, researchers should disclose the predictive relevance (Q^2) and the effect sizes (f^2). Following the recommendation, effect sizes and confidence intervals were incorporated into our reporting.

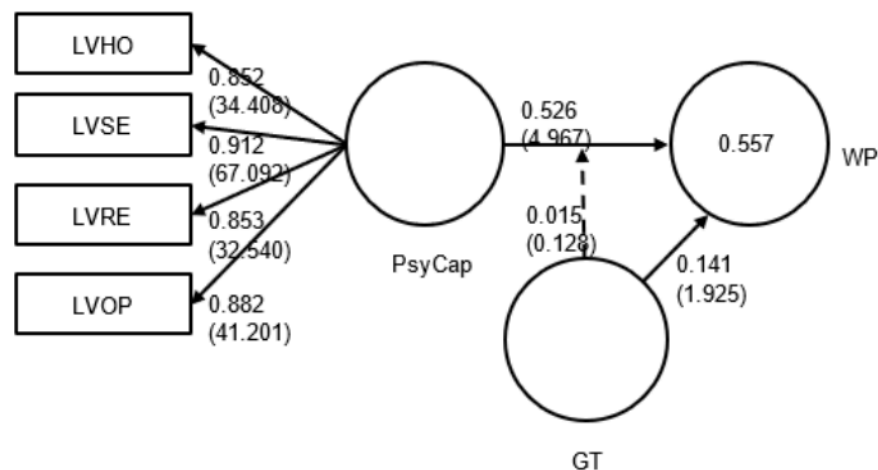


Fig. 2 Bootstrapping Results
(Source: SmartPLS 4.0 Bootstrapping Output)

The R^2 value in Figure 2 is 0.557, indicating that the model explains 55.7% of the variability in the dependent variable. In comparison, the model cannot explain the 0.443 (44.3%) variation. Excluded model components, random error, or noise may cause this. A robust fit is shown by the model explaining over 50% of the variance (Hair et al., 2022). PsyCap's direct relationship ($\beta=0.526$, $t=4.967$, $p<0.01$) showed a substantial positive correlation of over 2.33 at the 0.01 level

of significance, according to the structural model. With a moderate positive correlation ($\beta = 0.526$), an increase in the predictor variable is associated with a significant increase in the dependent variable. Moderate significance was suggested by the 4.967 t-value. The statistically significant result ($p < 0.01$) suggests that the predictor significantly impacts the outcome variable. Path coefficients were tested for statistical significance using the bootstrap confidence interval. The 95% confidence interval for PsyCap $\rightarrow$ Work Performance, ranging from 0.609 to 0.791, does not include zero, supporting the hypothesis. A medium effect size (Cohen, 1988) indicates that the predictor is somewhat important in explaining outcome variation. A predictive relevance (Q^2) of 0.479 indicates outstanding model prediction accuracy. For novel or unfamiliar data, it consistently accounts for 47.9% of the dependent variable's variance. PsyCap has a small, beneficial, and statistically significant effect on work performance.

The moderation hypothesis was tested concurrently with the direct effect using the two-stage moderation assessment method proposed by Chin et al. (2003), which is suitable for models involving continuous moderators. In this study, generational traits (GT) were hypothesized to moderate the relationship between Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and work performance (WP), aligning with the research question: *Does Gen Z's unique generational profile influence the effect of PsyCap on their work performance?* The analysis, conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 with 10,000 bootstrap subsamples and a one-tailed Percentile Bootstrap at the 10% significance level, revealed that the interaction effect was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.015$, $t = 0.128$, $p > 0.1$). The 90% bootstrap confidence interval for the interaction term (GT $\times$ PsyCap $\rightarrow$ WP) ranged from -0.138 to 0.161, which includes zero, further indicating that no moderation effect was present.

This finding suggests that, contrary to expectations, Gen Z's generational traits do not significantly alter the impact of PsyCap on work performance. The implication is twofold. First, PsyCap appears to influence performance in a relatively consistent manner across Gen Z individuals, regardless of variations in their generational attitudes or behaviours. Second, while tailoring workplace strategies to generational traits is often emphasized in the literature, these results imply that efforts to enhance performance may be more effectively focused on developing psychological resources (e.g., hope, resilience, optimism, self-efficacy) rather than relying on generational customization alone.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature on workplace psychology by examining the moderating role of generational traits in the PsyCap–performance relationship among Malaysian Gen Z employees. While it was hypothesized that Gen Z traits would moderate this relationship, the results showed no significant interaction. Thus, the effect of PsyCap on work performance appears consistent across varying expressions of Gen Z traits. These findings offer both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they suggest that generational traits may not always function as meaningful moderators within psychological performance models, highlighting the need to test such assumptions empirically across cultural contexts. Practically, they suggest that organizations should prioritize building PsyCap as a general resource for improving performance, rather than over-emphasizing generational customization. Future research should consider exploring other potential moderators, such as organizational culture, leadership style, or job role complexity, that might better explain variability in the PsyCap–performance linkage.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite providing valuable insights into the influence of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and generational traits (GT) on work performance among Malaysian Gen Z employees, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causal relationships between PsyCap, GT, and work performance, as data were collected at a single point in time. Future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs would be better suited for examining changes over time and establishing causality. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced common method bias, social desirability bias, or inaccuracies due to subjective self-assessment. While anonymity was preserved to reduce bias, future studies should consider incorporating supervisor evaluations or objective performance metrics for validation. Third, the generalizability of the findings is limited. As the sample comprised only Malaysian Gen Z employees, the results may not apply to other generational cohorts or cultural contexts. Replicating the study in diverse Asian and non-Asian settings would enhance external validity and contextual relevance. Fourth, the measurement of generational traits may not have fully captured the complexity of generational identities. Although GT was analysed as a continuous moderator, generational dynamics often encompass nuanced, qualitative dimensions. Thus, employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches could yield richer insights into how generational characteristics shape workplace attitudes and behaviours. Finally, the study did not account for contextual or organizational variables such as industry type, organizational culture, leadership style, or job complexity. These factors may interact with PsyCap and GT in shaping performance outcomes and could partly explain the non-significant moderation effects observed. Future research should control for these variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of performance drivers in the workplace.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

This work was prepared using Quillbolt and Grammarly for language improvement. These tools allowed the authors to examine and edit the content and accept full responsibility for the publication.

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