

# Facing “Goliath” in Public Speaking: Communication Apprehension among Malaysian Tertiary Learners

Joseph Alagiaraj Thambu Raj<sup>1\*</sup>, Asmaa AlSaqqaf<sup>2</sup>, Lindey Easter Apolonius<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
UiTM Cawangan Sabah, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia  
joe1@uitm.edu.my

<sup>2</sup>Centre For The Promotion Of Knowledge And Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah,  
Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia  
asma3030@ums.edu.my

<sup>3</sup>I Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA  
UiTM Cawangan Sabah, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia  
lindey@uitm.edu.my

\*Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:** Communication apprehension, which refers to the fear or anxiety experienced in classrooms, is a considerable obstacle for Malaysian tertiary learners, especially in public speaking scenarios. This paper presents a general overview of published studies of communication apprehension in public speaking among Malaysian learners since 2019. This systematic literature review examines two research questions: what are the causes of communication apprehension among Malaysian tertiary learners and what are the most effective strategies to overcome communication apprehension in public speaking. Fifteen studies were thoroughly reviewed. The results indicate that the majority of tertiary learners in Malaysia generally have a moderate level of communication apprehension, which is mostly caused by the fear of being evaluated, anxiousness, and a lack of self-efficacy abilities. It also showed female learners were more courageous to face apprehension in public speaking than males. Several strategies suggested to address communication apprehension are by modifying teaching methods, creating positive and stress-free classroom environments and giving positive and constructive feedback

**Keywords:** Affective filter, Communication apprehension, Public speaking, Self-efficacy

## 1. Introduction

In Malaysian universities' offering English courses, public speaking is taught to test and enhance confidence. As English is a second language and all students who have completed eleven years of schooling are required to be proficient, the mastery of the language can be shown through public speaking skills, where a speaker must use both spoken and non-spoken communication to a live audience. Verbal communication involves verbal expression through word pronunciation, tone, and voice projection. Nonverbal communication includes eye contact, facial emotions, and gestures (Lucas, 2015; Yee et al., 2022). This paper will use the term communication apprehension (CA), coined by McCroskey (1970) which include terms like stage fright, nervousness, speaking anxiety, glossophobia, and public speaking anxiety. CA is also a handicap owing to negative childhood experiences and refusal to communicate (McCroskey, 1970a; Wrench, J.S., Brogan, S.M., McCroskey, J.C. & Jowi, 2008). In fact, CA is a significant factor contributing to the subpar performance of Malaysian graduates in interviews (Raj & AlSaqqaf, 2024).

The purpose of the study is to examine what are the causes of CA in public speaking which are prevalent among tertiary learners in Malaysia. Thus, it aims to attain two main objectives. Firstly, it aims to identify the common causes of CA faced by tertiary learners in Malaysia. This directs to the first research question: “What are the common causes of communication apprehension faced by Malaysian tertiary learners?” Secondly, it aims to identify the remedies to communication apprehension in the classroom. This leads to the second research question: “What are the strategies to address communication apprehension?” Through the creation of an efficient teaching and learning environment, the findings of the study will be able to assist educators in addressing the issue of communication apprehension with their learners.

CA is considered as a social phobia, a condition for which renowned pharmaceutical corporations prescribe medication to alleviate public anxiety (Wrench et al., 2008). The prevalence of CA has increased from approximately 20% to 40% in the 1970s to around 77% of the global population in the present millennium ((Fritscher, 2021; McCroskey, 1984; Wrench et al., 2008). Loureiro et al., (2020) observed that learners encountering difficulties with CA exhibit notable challenges in the classroom when they need to present assignments in the form of public speaking.

The term CA has transitioned from a general dread of public speaking to include several aspects such as states, traits, contexts, person-group dynamics, and situational influences (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986; McCroskey, 1970a, 1984). The categorisation of trait-CA and context-CA is as predisposition, and state-CA is noted as the actual fear response. Table 1 shows the relationship of the types of CA.

**Table 1.** Types of Communication Apprehension

Type	Examples
Trait-CA - a general tendency of apprehension experienced in the past in various situations forming part of personality	An individual who regularly experiences anxiety about speaking in public, participating in group discussions, or engaging in interpersonal communication may be categorised as having trait communication apprehension.
Context-CA - apprehension experienced in particular communication situations.	One may feel at ease speaking in public but feel anxious while having one-on-one discussions with authoritative figures like supervisors or professors.
State-CA - temporary apprehension experienced in specific situation	An individual who is usually self-assured may feel increased nervousness before delivering a presentation to a large crowd or participating in a tense situation with increased heart-rate, sweating, stammering or repeating words during speech.

Source : Asparanita, (2020); McCroskey (1984)

According to Table 1, Trait-like CA exhibits anxiety towards a variety of communication situations. These speakers who experience trait-like CA are usually normal abled people who just fear the encounters that make them sense dread and discomfort in certain social interactions Asparanita, (2020) defines it as the inclination or disposition of an individual to experience feelings of nervousness or anxiety, irrespective of the circumstances or context, as a result of previous experiences. It is also noted that a mixture of languages during the school years and a lack of reinforcement for communication by parents who could be linguistically challenged to use a second language would discourage the child to use the language (McCroskey, 1977).

Context CA is a subcategory or trait apprehension that relates to anxiety that is persistent and is heightened due to specific contexts or situations like public speaking or class presentation (Asparanita, 2020; Ellis, 1994). Thus, one with high context-CA would try to avoid these contexts if possible. The context that is focused on this study would be public speaking. The past negative experiences in this context would reflect on the trait of public speaking scale.

Meanwhile, State-like CA usually occurs during public speaking or group discussions (McCroskey, 1984). Despite it being a normal response or reaction, it can impede public speaking performance as the speaker is unsure why he or she is going through this process of fear. A person with high state-CA experiences increased heart-rate, sweating, stammering or repeating words during his or her speech. It is also

identified as state anxiety which arises in a particular situation or a high-pressure event like public speaking but it is not long lasting Ellis (1994) as cited in Asparanita, (2020). Thus, it is considered as an anxious feeling that disappears when the stressful event ends.

Tertiary learners in South East Asia generally face CA especially in negative evaluations as well as lack of vocabulary knowledge (Indrianty, 2016). The data was validated by observations, interviews and classroom interactions. Non-verbal communication or body language also can be utilised to identify CA where touching of the head or any part of attire worn during presentation as well as changing body postures several times during presentation without eye contact with the audience relates the fear or apprehension faced by the speaker (Aripin et al., 2020).

## **2. Public Speaking Skills in Malaysian Tertiary Education**

Communication or public speaking skills are offered as courses in public and private tertiary institutions in Malaysia with more than fifty percent or forty-two universities providing communication skills courses for the undergraduates (Connect, 2023; StudyMalaysia.com, 2022). With the emerging importance of public speaking skills, Malaysian private tertiary institutions also offer online public speaking courses. Currently, there are twenty two Malaysian private institutions that offer public speaking courses (Coursetakers.com., 2024)

Various studies highlight the factors influencing speaking skills from aural medium and listening skills, affective factors as well as cultural and educational background (Brown, 2011; Kamal et al., 2022; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Shumin, 2002). Thus, enhancing speaking skills in Malaysian tertiary education requires a multifaceted approach addressing factors affecting learners. Among the approaches that Oxford (1994) suggests are affective strategies which address these challenges, highlighting approaches such as lowering anxiety, fostering encouragement and increasing emotional awareness. These strategies such as relaxation, deep breathing, using music and laughter as well as making positive statements to create a low anxiety environment aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis' which are considered as effective strategies for enhancing learning and confidence (Krashen, 2009).

## **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach by encompassing three stages of systematic literature review: designing, conducting and writing the review as adapted from Snyder (2019) which consists of three stages; planning by identifying the need for review, conducting and reporting review. It is an essential scientific research method employed to locate, assess, analyse, and summarise all available research pertaining to specific research inquiries. The initial phase of designing the review was recognising the necessity for doing such a study while the second phase was to conduct a review and analyse the type of CA faced in public speaking among Malaysian learners in addition to taking note of strategies to overcome it. Primary study reports from journals were chosen for extraction and synthesis of data. Finally, reporting the findings would be the third step.

A collection of journals were obtained from Google Scholar in January 2024 by searching for "Comprehension Apprehension in public speaking among Malaysian learners". The database search was specifically focused on studies conducted in Malaysia. As a result, the initial search produced over 17000 results. However, after narrowing the topic to 'Malaysian tertiary learners' which include "undergraduates and post graduates in Malaysian universities", the search produced over 15000 results. Despite the huge number of results, 15 articles were shortlisted as the first 15 articles in three initial pages that highlight CA in public speaking in Malaysia. Typically, there is no rigid minimum requirement for the number of studies. Some rigorous systematic reviews may incorporate just a limited number of studies or, in certain instances, none at all if there is a dearth of adequate research in the field (Dekkers et al., 2022). For specific topics, a reduced sample size is adequate as long as they align with the aims and focus of the review where the quality of the articles are more significant than the quantity (Gough et al., 2017; Moher et al., 2010). Thus, the 15 articles exhibit methodological rigour and significant relevance which yield adequate data for a comprehensive evaluation on causes and suggested strategies to overcome communication apprehension.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The summary of empirical evidence regarding the challenges faced among learners as well as suggested effective strategies to overcome these issues are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Summary of the past related studies which focused on communication apprehension faced by Malaysia tertiary ESL learners and the suggested effective strategies to counter communication apprehension

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
1	2019	Undergraduates' Speaking Anxiety in English as Second Language (ESL) Classrooms (Long,K.L.Y.,;Yih,Y.J.;Lin,S.S.P.)	592 degree undergraduates from two public higher learning institutions	Quantitative research design instrument : PSCAS Speaking anxiety level mean is 3 categories according to Baharuddin (2009) with 3.67 -5.00 as high anxiety level	*Undergraduates experienced average level of speaking anxiety *CA ranked the highest (m=3.37) followed by Fear of negative evaluation (3.36) * Females face higher anxiety *Comfort of the classroom environment is significantly different among genders where female undergraduates are more relaxed and calm as well as anticipate they can speak well in the future. *Suggest to carry out effective teaching methods to overcome apprehension like board game -Speaking Chess.
2	2020	Second Language Speaking Anxiety Among Malaysian Postgraduate Students at a Faculty of Education (Badrasawi, K.J.I.; Solihu, A. & Ahmad,T. T, B,)	290 school teachers pursuing master's degree Female: 174(60%) Male : 116(40%)	Quantitative cross-sectional survey design; convenience sampling; instrument: FLCAS-5 point likert scale; Rasch Measurement Modelling	* Most teachers did not show high speaking anxiety * They were worried about expressing themselves effectively when making mistakes and how the lecturers would respond *Teachers need help confronting the fear of speaking with proper training

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
3	2020	Speaking Anxiety Among Postgraduate International Students in the Academic Context of a University in Malaysia (Taly, B.C.;Paramasivam,S.)	15 international postgraduate students 7 male 8 female	Qualitative Phenomenology	*Highly structured and formal environments induce feelings of anxiety *Language instructors play a vital role in helping learners in managing their anxiety
4	2020	English Language Speaking Anxiety among Students from Two Public Universities in Sarawak (Lin, SSP;Yeo,JY;Lau,KYL)	592 from two public universities	Quantitative PSCAS questionnaire	*Moderate communication apprehension experienced due to lack of assurance ranked the highest and fear of negative evaluation as second *Positive correlation between speaking anxiety and SPM English results where the higher the results the higher the anxiety at $r=.510$ *Suggest educators to provide a stress free environment that is conducive and engaging practices in the classroom
5	2020	Speaking Apprehension: Evidence from Oral Presentations in Content Subject Classes ( Kadir H.; Raof A.H.A.)	125 engineering undergraduates	Mixed Design Descriptive and qualitative Questionnaire (Matsumoto et al.1988) -comprised four sections: background of respondents, background of oral presentation, anxiety related experience and	*64.8% said had to do 3 presentations every semester 85 or 68% faced higher anxiety presenting individually *Limited language proficiency (38%) cause CA * Lack of self-efficacy skills also contribute to CA * Frequent practice could enhance self confidence

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
6	2021	Speaking in English: Oral Communication Apprehension and Self Perceived Communication Competence (Hussin,S.H. & Makmur, A.N.)	Final year marketing students	role of subject lecturers Observation of high anxiety participants -Semi-structured interview Quantitative instrument: PRCA-24 , Self Perceived Communication Competence correlation	*Showed marketing undergraduates had moderate level of CA *Significant correlation between CA and self-perceived communicative competence at moderate level
7	2021	Public Speaking Anxiety in Oral Presentation Class among Undergraduates ( Naser, N.A.M.; Isa, I.A.M)	150 learners from UITM Shah Alam selected randomly	Quantitative Instruments : PSCAS Inferential statistics correlation between PSAnxiety and English speaking performance	*Majority faced moderate level of anxiety *Significant correlation between PSA and learner performance where high speaking anxiety scored higher grades in presentation marks. *Comfortable learning environment and teacher's role are crucial
8	2021	From The King's Speech to the classrooms: Tertiary students' speaking anxiety and language proficiency (Zabidin, N.;Atan,Dellah,N.F.;Nordin,N.A.;Amanah,F.H.)	244 students	Quantitative FLCAS	*Participants faced high speaking anxiety *There is a significant negative correlation between a person's level of language proficiency and their speaking anxiety, especially their fear of negative evaluation

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
9	2022	Discovering The Relationship between Communication Strategies and Fear of Oral Presentation among University Students ( Ahmad ,S.N; Rahmat, N.H;Shahabani, N.S.; Khairuddin, Z.)	134 respondents from public university	Quantitative Adopted survey from Yaman and Kawasogiu (2013) Communication Strategies and Endler's (1980) fear of oral presentation	*Most participants prefer to create good impression(social affective strategy) *least preferred strategy is not minding taking risk despite making mistake *highest external fear is the scores or marks and the least fear is physical setting *highest internal fear is nervousness *showed low negative correlation of communication strategies and internal fear of oral presentation meaning some strategies might help reduce fear *suggest a educators to implement communication strategies to counter public speaking fear
10	2022	Self-regulatory strategies Used by Malaysian University Students in Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study ( Tee, X.T.;Joanna,T.A.T.;Kamarulzaman,W.)	65 university students	Explanatory sequential mixed methods Questionnaire PSCAS Group Interview	*Significant moderate correlation between English SPM scores and negative evaluation as well as communication apprehension at -.522 and -.495 respectively *On 5 main themes on self-regulatory strategies;affective strategy recorded highest (take deep breaths , listen to relaxing music)
11	2022	Needs Analysis for the Development of a Counseling Module as an Intervention to Reduce CA among Students of Higher Learning Institutions ( Majid , N.H.A.;Rafes, N.M.;Ahmad,N.S. & Aman, R.C.)	384 students from 6 universities	Quantitative Cross Sectional PRCA Needs Analysis	*Majority of students (278)-78% had moderate level of CA and 86 students (22.4%) had high levels of CA. The dimension of public speaking obtained the highest for CA.

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
					*Based on Cognitive Behaviour Theory, a counselling module can help reduce CA
12	2022	Oral Presentation Anxiety among undergraduate Malaysian Chinese students in a private university (An, F. Y.;Ravindran,L.;Al-Shaibani,G.K.S.)	60 undergraduates	Mixed method approach Questionnaire (ELCAS)33 items Semi structured interview -phone recorder -Skype 6 interviewees	*36(60%) had moderate speaking anxiety *Feeling a lack of preparation cause CA *Students often rehearse and practice before a presentation. *Students would seek guidance from peers who had high level of proficiency *Suggest students share with peers and and get guidance *Lecturers need to create positive learning environment`
13	2022	Exploring Communication Strategies and Fear of Oral Presentation among Undergraduates (Ahmad,S.H.;Rahmat,N.H.; Shahabani,N.S.)	51 participants 30 female 21 male	Quantitative survey 40 items Section B -26 items Communication Strategies (Yaman and Kavasoglu,2013) Section C -14 items Causes of Fear of Oral Presentation (Endler,1980)	*Social affective strategy showed many were interested on how the audience feel about their presentation *Choice of fluency strategy clear delivery was chosen *Fear of oral presentations is caused by evaluation marks (external) *Nervousness is the largest factor internally. *Educators should foster positive and conducive teaching environment

No	Year	Article	Number of respondents	Research Design	Findings/Suggestions
14	2023	Factors of public speaking anxiety (PSA) and strategies to mitigate PSA among postgraduate students of Malaysian public universities in online presentations (Paridaluddin, M. S.N.F.; Zhang, J.C.; Chen, R.)	3 postgraduate phd students using purposive sampling	Qualitative research design PRPSA-adapted 4 items FLCAS-adapted 5 items Interviews via zoom thematic analysis Explore perception of speaking anxiety	*The causes of public speaking anxiety include the classroom atmosphere, fear of vocal expression, fear of making mistakes, and fear of evaluation. *Lack of confidence and self esteem as additional causes *First strategy is preparation *Practice before presentation *Slowing speech is another strategy
15	2023	The Relationship between Language Learning Anxiety and English Language Speaking Performance among Pre-Diploma Students at A Public University in Malaysia (Manan, N. A.; Yusof, J.; Azizan, N.)	193 pre-diploma students	Quantitative FLCAS to find out correlation between level of apprehension to performance	*Negative correlation at $r=-0.23$ where more anxious the students the poorer the speaking performance. *The primary source of anxiety is the fear of being negatively judged and the anxiety associated with communication apprehension. *Language educators should employ meaningful positive stress free environment

## **5. Findings**

From the 15 articles analysed as shown in Table 2, more than 60%, or 10 articles, identified the fear of negative evaluation as the most common cause of fear among learners. The second most common cause of fear of public speaking is CA, which can be divided into internal and external fear. External fear includes the fear of negative evaluation or receiving poor marks, while internal fear involves nervousness or a fast heartbeat, often expressed through awkward gestures that indicate restlessness (Ahmad et al., 2022). However, Long et al.(2019) found that CA was the main reason for fear of public speaking among 592 degree undergraduates, followed by fear of negative evaluation. Although the majority of respondents from most studies experienced moderate CA, there was a positive correlation between English performance and apprehension which shows that the high apprehensive learners managed to do well due to the effort taken by practising.

It can be concluded that the primary factor that influences public speaking performance in the classroom is fear or apprehension. This fear which is known as CA in this paper is measured in all the researches analysed using either one or more of the following questionnaires namely Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24), Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSRPA) by McCroskey (1984), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) an adapted unverified questionnaire from Horwitz et al. (1986) by An et al.(2022) and Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) by (Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012)) which identify the levels and types of apprehension. Thus, most of these studies have used descriptive and inferential statistical data to draw a conclusion on communication apprehension effects. However, one study by Ahmad et al. (2022) had employed a survey using Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), an adapted questionnaire by Yaman & Kavasoglu (2013) to identify how communication strategies influence public speaking skills while only one study was conducted qualitatively through semi-structured interviews among fifteen postgraduate learners in a Malaysian public university (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020).

The thematic findings in the qualitative study showed that learning challenges, differences between students as well as fear of being evaluated by peers and lecturers were causes of CA. Similar findings of fear of being evaluated by lecturers were also identified in the quantitative and mixed method studies in addition to nervousness as causes of communication apprehension in public speaking in the other researches. In terms of difference between genders on levels of CA showed only one study found that female undergraduates faced higher apprehension in public speaking compared to male counterparts by Long et al.(2019), while others had not identified any significant difference between the genders. However, the female undergraduates were more comfortable in expressing themselves compared to males through body gestures when speaking, showing that females were more courageous in facing the apprehension in public speaking. Besides that, one mixed method study found lack of self-efficacy skills also contributed to CA (Kadir & Raof, 2020) where the respondents being engineering undergraduates believed to be anxious because of psychological reasons. This analysis highlights the importance of addressing both internal and external factors contributing to the fear of public speaking in educational settings. By addressing these internal and external factors, educators can create a more supportive environment for learners, enabling them to overcome their fears and improve their public speaking skills. This can be achieved through tailored interventions that focus on building self-efficacy, providing constructive feedback, and fostering a positive learning atmosphere.

## **6. Discussion on Strategies to Overcome CA**

As can be seen in Table 3, Malaysian tertiary learners manage CA via instructional strategies which can be modified to create a stress-free and engaging environment. In addition, deep breathing exercises and listening to relaxing music would be helpful too. Furthermore, practising oral presentations with peers and gaining feedback, while instructors giving positive and friendly feedback to those who are shy would boost their confidence. Creating a module to address CA and enhancing self-efficacy skills are also suggested.

**Table 3.** Summary of effective strategies

Strategy	Explanation	Source
Creating a Conducive Learning Environment	Many studies recommend modifying teaching methods to create a calm and appealing environment	Badrasawi et al., (2020); Long et al.(2019); Taly & Paramasivam (2020)
Deep Breathing and Relaxation Techniques	Deep breathing exercises and listening to music are effective strategies.	Tee et al.(2022)
Practice and Peer Feedback	Practising presentations and seeking feedback from peers can help build confidence and reduce CA	An et al.(2022)
Self-Regulatory Strategies	Incorporating self-efficacy skills and encouraging learners to use social-affective strategies, such as portraying a positive impression and using familiar vocabulary, can enhance communication competence	Ahmad et al.(2022)
Counselling and Support Modules	Developing counselling modules based on cognitive-behavioural theory to address high levels of CA	Majid et al.(2022)

With regards to strategies favoured by learners, found that proficient learners' highest preferred social-affective strategy was to portray a good impression to the audience followed by trying to relax when feeling anxious stressing on the importance of being calm. On fluency oriented strategy preferred; showed they tried to speak clearly and loudly to enhance comprehension of the message conveyed. In the negotiation for meaning strategies; many learners focused on reaction of the audience to their speech by making sure their understanding of the message while on message reduction, orientation and non-verbal strategies; the learners preferred using words that are familiar to their vocabulary level to ascertain meaningful communication as well as incorporating body gestures like eye-contact and facial expressions when they find it hard to explain particular information. In summary, the suggested strategies for the instructors or lecturers in the public speaking classroom is to bring a conducive learning environment and promote positive feedback in the classroom while the learners should be aware of their vocabulary knowledge and practise and enhance their delivery skills. Ultimately, fostering a positive, supportive classroom environment and promoting active engagement and feedback can significantly reduce CA and improve learners' public speaking abilities.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of fifteen studies conducted between 2019 and 2023 highlights the pervasive issue of communication apprehension (CA) among Malaysian ESL learners in tertiary institutions. The main causes contributing to CA are the fear of being negatively judged and internal factors such as anxiousness and a lack of self-confidence. Although many learners have some level of communication apprehension (CA), these anxieties have a major impact on their ability to perform well in public speaking. The research findings indicate that the dread of being assessed, both by peers and instructors, continually arises as a significant cause of anxiety. Female students typically display elevated levels of CA in comparison to their male peers. However, they also indicate a better degree of resilience in effectively managing their concerns. Overall, addressing communication apprehension requires a holistic approach involving both educators and learners. Educators should focus on fostering a supportive and engaging classroom atmosphere while providing constructive feedback. Learners, on

the other hand, should actively engage in self-efficacy practices and continuously refine their communication skills to overcome apprehension effectively. By implementing these strategies, it is possible to significantly reduce CA and improve public speaking performance among Malaysian tertiary ESL learners

## 8. Co-Authors Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the initial background research, prepared the literature review and overlooked the writeup of the whole article. Author2 elaborated research methodology and updated accordingly. Author3 edited the whole article.

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