



# Using photovoice to explore students' emotions of learning to write: "There is something about writing"

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The present study aims to scrutinize how employing photovoice in writing class helps uncover novice writers' emotions of learning to write. Eight secondary school students voluntarily participated in the two-session writing class. Accompanying the photovoice, the participants were also asked to write a reflective journal for additional data collection. Results indicate that these novice writers, though experienced confusion and encountered various problems, persisted in completing the writing assignment due to their intrinsic motivation. This suggests that teachers should incorporate in their teachings explanation of the importance of enhancing one's writing competence to grow students' motivation and interests in writing

**Keywords:** photovoice, writing, students' emotions, secondary school

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## INTRODUCTION

Researchers globally have acknowledged the use of photovoice as a means to empower participants, particularly in participatory researches. Photovoice can be described as a specific visual methodology where participants take photos and actively engage in the research process, enabling them to document and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, critically talk through essential issues to generate shared knowledge, and reach decision makers ([C. Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997](#); [C. C. Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001](#)). In a photovoice study, participants reflect on their photos by doing a structured photo elicitation, interview or informal discussion, to produce personal narratives which raises critical consciousness ([Carlson et al., 2006](#); [Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006](#); [C. Wang & Burris, 1997](#)). As the nature of photovoice believes, as noted by ([Koltz et al., 2010](#)), "that the individuals being studied are the experts of their own truth regarding their life experiences, subsequently using photos to record their reality" (p.392), this kind of research method is likely to provide a more comprehensive information about the participants' feelings. In other words, by employing a photovoice in our research, we have given a priority to the participants' voices, of which we can use to improve our current practices in order to satisfy the participants' needs. Hence, photovoice methodology provides a rich and meaningful experience that benefits both participants and researchers.

With regard to language learning settings, photovoice can be utilized to explore learners' perspectives and engage them in meaningful learning activities. It means that the study will be centred upon participants' critical awareness of their language learning experiences and opportunity to use a photo product to voice their concerns in order to promote changes. Several studies have employed photovoice to elevate language classrooms to another level. For example, the use of photovoice as a data-creating strategy which was implemented in a workshop with critical pedagogy to create a rich EFL learning in Elementary EFL Education in Spain (Villacañas de Castro, 2017). In this study, students were empowered to actualize their intellectual capacities for future EFL learning. Moreover, Strawn and Monama (2012) investigated how photovoice could be implemented to improve participants' reading and writing skills in South Africa. Through the photovoice project, it was found that the participants also explored their identities and improved critical thinking. Additionally, a photovoice interface effectively promotes non-native pre-service English teachers' learning autonomy, creativity and motivation in language learning (Rubrico, 2014).

In the context of secondary education, Zenkov et al. (2014) used photograph elicitation to get lessons from English Language Learning (ELL) youth. In this study, adolescent subjects who were treated as researchers were involved in a participatory action research to explore their impressions of school and literacy pedagogies. The project calls on teachers and teacher educators to consider the "kids as researchers" as an approach to writing instruction. In addition, photography stories from Native American high school students were used to develop a literacy program which was based on community and culture (Stanton & Sutton, 2012). The outcomes of the project demonstrate that photovoice can "bridge forms of literacy, content areas, and genres while supporting collaboration, engagement, and action within the larger community (p.83)." However, the number of studies that focus on the use of photovoice in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classrooms in the area of secondary education remains underexplored, despite the need of understanding secondary students' struggle in learning to write.

The ability to write must be nurtured as early as possible. Writing, serving as a productive skill, has "the potential to unlock and develop higher order learning attributes in pupils" (Thompson, 2012). It also affects students' cognitive process abundantly which benefits them in any academic setting (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Graham, 2019). Writing, thereby, can be seen as the core of a foreign language classroom. Nonetheless, as argued by Thompson (2012), as writing involves a highly complex process, both students and teachers often have to struggle in a writing classroom, including in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classroom. For instance, EFL students encounter problems with linguistic proficiency, structure organization and low motivation (Fareed et al., 2016).

Hence, by developing a sense of critical awareness and reflecting students' journey in a writing classroom, students and teachers therefore can promote a change in their approach of learning to write and teaching writing.

Grounded in this empirical data, the purpose of the present study is to scrutinize the secondary school students' emotional experiences of writing an English essay. By employing the photovoice method, the teenage students were encouraged to self-investigate and make sense of these lived experiences. The conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Figure 1. This study has implications for understanding the struggles encountered by teenage students in learning to write in a foreign language and using the knowledge to develop a future writing approach that benefits secondary school students.

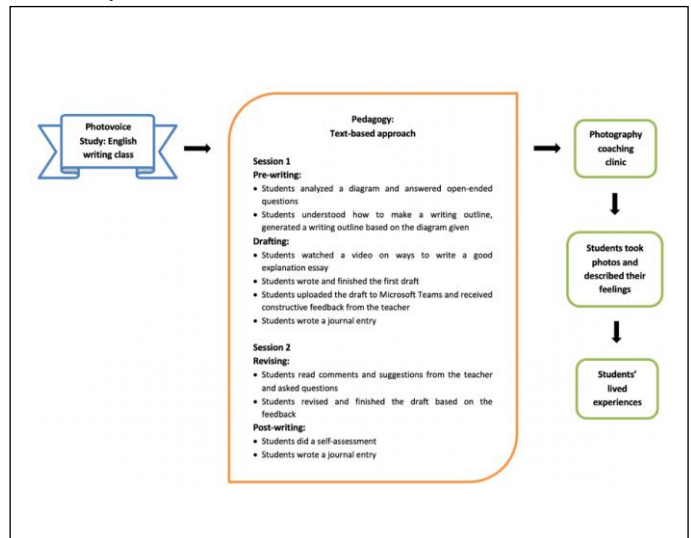


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework of the study

## METHOD

### Participants

In this participatory study, eight senior high school students, consisting of 4 males and 4 females, participated in the text-based writing lesson. They ranged from 16-18 years old. These adolescents were recruited because (1) they are considered as articulate students (2) the participants' levels of English proficiency are between intermediate and high, enabling them to follow the lesson easier, and (3) they willingly joined the two online writing sessions and a photography coaching clinic which were conducted outside the school hours.

The first researcher contacted each student personally through WhatsApp and arranged a specific time to meet through a video conference. In the virtual meeting, both researchers explained briefly to these students the purpose of the present study including how it was going to be conducted and what kind of contribution expected from them.

**TABLE 1** | Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Age	Sex	Pseudonyms	Age	Sex
Participant 1	18	Male	Participant 5	17	Female
Participant 2	17	Female	Participant 6	16	Male
Participant 3	17	Female	Participant 7	18	Male
Participant 4	17	Female	Participant 8	17	Male

The researcher also ensured that the participants' details were kept confidential and real names were replaced with pseudonyms. Moreover, they were made aware that the data they generated used only for the research purpose. To further maintain ethical responsibilities, at the end of the video conference, online consent forms made with Zoho platform were distributed to all participants through WhatsApp messages. Each participant filled in and signed the form voluntarily with parents' permissions.

### The English writing class instructional design

Adopting the text-based approach, the writing class designed for this participatory experiment followed [Mickan's \(2016\)](#) writing framework (observing and understanding, responding to text, analysing text, and composing). For the purpose of this study, this framework was changed into pre-writing, drafting, revising, and post-writing stages which altogether were presented in two sessions, with each session lasted for 90 minutes. The English writing class was done by utilizing synchronous and asynchronous methods. Generally, researcher gave an explanation on the material given through a video conference in order to ensure students' thorough comprehension. Meanwhile, activities that required longer time to finish such as writing the draft and revising the draft were done asynchronously. Nonetheless, the participants were encouraged to consult their works regularly to the researcher throughout the sessions through WhatsApp messages. Regarding the text genre, the model text presented to the participants was an explanation text. This genre was selected since the students have learned about the structures of the text in the previous academic year, thus being already familiar with this kind of text. Nonetheless, a different topic, bullying, was given as to maintain the students' motivation in learning to write.

#### Pre-writing stage

At the very beginning of this research, teenage students were given a diagram illustrating how bullying happened. They were required to analyse and understand the main features of the diagram. Open-ended questions were later asked to the students in order to elicit their existing knowledge about the topic.

Afterward, the students learned how to develop a writing outline for an explanation text by watching a video. Researchers strengthen their knowledge by giving further explanation on the issue and a sample outline. The last activity in this stage was students generating a writing outline about the topic given. Students independently produced a writing outline based on the diagram presented at the beginning of the session and received immediate feedback from the researchers.

#### Drafting stage

In this stage, teenage students started to learn to write an English essay. By consulting to the writing outline produced earlier, students wrote their first draft of a 200-word explanation text. They were allowed to look up to the dictionary if they have problems with lexical items during the process. Once the students finished their writings, they were required to upload their work in the Microsoft Teams application to later receive feedback from the researchers.

#### Revising stage

In the second session of this English writing class, the secondary school students worked on the revision of their explanation text drafts. After receiving feedback from the researcher which was uploaded in Microsoft Teams application, students read every comment and suggestion given carefully. They were also encouraged to ask questions so they understood the issues thoroughly. Afterward, the teenage students started revising their first draft based on the feedback, while also received immediate comments from the researchers along the process. The next steps were to edit and rewrite the explanation essays.

#### Post-writing stage

It is important to help students have a deep understanding of the writing process. Equally important is to help them reflect on their writing journey in order to foster learning awareness. Therefore, in this last writing stage, students were required to do a self-assessment with the help of a self-assessment sheet. They were required to check their writing accuracy, coherence, lexical items and sentence organization.

## DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

This participatory study used two rounds of data collection which were gathered from journaling and photo-elicitation process. Both types of data were complementary in which one data enriched the other. At the end of the first session of the writing class, the participants wrote a journal entry through an online journal template prepared by the researchers. These teenage students were guided to express their feelings when learning to write an English text, the problems that they found when composing a writing outline and a draft, and their strategies to overcome these problems. The journal entry was written in Bahasa Indonesia to make the students feel at ease in describing their feelings. After reading the students' reflective journals from this session, the researchers contacted several participants personally through WhatsApp for clarification and some additional information.

Following the first session, the teenage students joined another writing session through a video conference in which the first researcher gave an explanation about the feedback on the participants' drafts. This was done because several students expressed difficulties in understanding the comments given. Students were also informed to describe their feelings and reflect on their journey of revising their pieces of writings in the reflective journal. Again, Bahasa Indonesia was preferred for the language used to write as to ensure the participants' convenience.

When the two writing sessions ended and after all the students had handed in their final version of their writings, a photography coaching clinic was carried out by the second researcher. In this context, the participants were introduced to the nature of metaphoric images and what they might symbolize. Metaphoric pictures were selected due to its' ability to capture complex experiences, feelings, or ideas in a simple manner (Rania et al., 2014). With regards to the research data, the students were required to take three different metaphoric images with their mobile phones that best represented their lived experiences when learning to write. Then, they were asked to select one particular picture and provide descriptions of the picture by answering these questions: (1) when and where did you take the picture? (2) why did you take the picture? and (3) in what way did the picture represent your emotions when learning to write an English text? The pictures along with the descriptions were later submitted to the researcher through Microsoft Teams application.

All the data collected from the session journal and photo voice were translated simultaneously from Bahasa Indonesia into English to be analysed. The translation was kept as authentic as possible in which we maintained the actual wordings of the participants. Both the first and second researchers were then engaged in an inductive approach to the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We immersed ourselves in reading the translated data in order to identify the emerging themes. These emerging themes were then colour coded with different colours corresponding to

different themes by the second researcher. After that, these themes were double checked by the first researcher before being compiled into a code table for clarity.

Next, the two researchers were engaged in an in-depth face-to-face discussion to explore each of the recurring theme. We wrote memos and generated any additional relevant information around each topic. During the process, we made sure to consult to the actual students' reflective journals and photo voice to keep the accuracy of the data. Finally, we re-read the emerging themes, our memos from discussion, and supplementary information and consulted them with our research purpose. We kept only the most significant and prominent parts to avoid over generalization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This photovoice study is conducted to examine teenage students' emotions of learning to write an English essay. Through the photovoice, students were empowered to make meaning of their feelings when joining the writing class. The following sections will discuss four themes that emerged from students' reflections of their writing experiences. These themes include (i) students' struggles with writing; (ii) difficulties in revising the draft, (iii) positive attitudes toward writing class; and (iv) determination to finish writing assignment.



The picture represents my feelings during participating in the photovoice research. The sky and the sun represent my excitement in writing the explanation text. The clouds that cover the sun symbolize that I thought hard about the topic, searched the related articles, and struggled in revising my script.

I felt happy and excited, but sometimes I felt tired because I had to think hard. It is not easy to write something because it will drain my mind and my energy, and because I am a perfectionist person, so I gave my best effort.

**FIGURE 2** Participant 5's photovoice

### Students' Struggles with Writing

Writing an English essay is considered troublesome by these young writers. They often felt confused and exhausted along this academical journey. This occurred particularly because students found difficulty in trying to find ideas for their writing regarding the topic given. Figure 2 and 3 are the



photovoice taken by Participant 5 and Participant 6 representing their writing experiences metaphorically.



This snapshot already covers a variety of items linked to my sentiments. The night in this photograph accurately depicts my empty mood as my writing class, which I have been attending for about a month, is about to end. Moreover, the ride in the photo reminds me a bit of a carousel game that always spins around aimlessly, just like me when trying to look for ideas, always spinning and often confused in many ways.

**FIGURE 3** Participant 6's photovoice

Another participant, on her reflective journal, stated that she thought hard about the correct sentence structures, grammar, and cohesion of her writing piece. Moreover, since her English vocabulary is inadequate, she felt unconfident with her writing. She wrote:

It was difficult. Apart from thinking about the sentence structures, I had to be careful with the grammar and the cohesion of the text, too. I wanted to give my best effort in this writing class, but it turned out I gave too many insignificant details in my writing, making it difficult to understand. I am not confident with my English because my vocabulary is lacking. (Participant 2, reflective journal, September 25th, 2021)

Our results demonstrate that the participants of this photovoice study had problems with generating ideas and elaborating them into a good English for their writing composition. These difficulties are mainly caused by the lack of the target language exposure, low input of the language teaching context, and the dominant use of home language in the classroom (Abongdia, 2015). For this reason, teachers need to support students by giving sufficient brainstorming activities and providing these young writers with a good instruction which is critical to their writing development (Benko, 2012).

Furthermore, these teenage students also faced difficulty in sentence organization, vocabulary and grammar, or

fuzziness. A similar point was found in a study conducted by Dayij & Algomoul (2011) who investigate the teaching of writing in a secondary school in Jordan. They reported that the secondary school students struggled with semantics, syntax, cohesion, coherence, and other mechanics of writing composition. As a matter of fact, developing important skills to improve writing performance requires a lot of hard work (Abongdia & Mpiti, 2015). Therefore, as emphasized by Ismail (2011), in order to help students develop their writing proficiency, teachers need to expose students to further trainings in writing English composition.

### Difficulties in Revising the Draft

While several participants identified hardships in searching for ideas for writing and when thinking about the grammar and lexical items, some others reported an even greater problem in revising their essays after being given the written feedbacks. For example, Participant 4 wrote:

Knowing that almost all of my writing needed revision, I lost my motivation. But I understood that it was needed as there were so many errors in my draft. So, I tried to revise and rewrite my text. I thought really hard while writing this essay. (Participant 4, reflective journal, September 24th, 2021)

As written in her reflective journal, Participant 4 reflected her mood after reading the feedback on her writing. She reported that she experienced demotivation, knowing that there were so many errors found in her draft. However, she persisted and worked hard to edit and complete her composition.

Similar to Participant 4, other participants stated that they found it hard to revise their writing and got even more confused along the way. Participant 3 talked about her effort in revising her text's title and the paragraphs, meanwhile Participant 6 expressed how the process of revision made him doubt his own writing ability. The following are the journal entries written by Participant 3 and Participant 6.

To be honest, revising was a lot harder than writing the first draft. I got very confused in this stage. I tried to revise the title of my text but got nothing. Revising the first paragraph was easy, because there was not much to be corrected. However, when I attempted to revise the remaining paragraphs, I struggled in constructing my words. (Participant 3, reflective journal, September 25th, 2021)

I felt like a mess when I tried to revise my draft. It made me question my own competence in writing. (Participant 6, reflective journal, September 25th, 2021)

Writing revision is challenging since students are required to critically discover and activate new knowledge, skills, and resources in order to solve the problems found in their writing, instead of solely using the existing ones. It is, therefore, not surprising that the participants of the present study struggled in this particular process.

However, as argued by [Keen \(2020\)](#), the transition from draft to revision without doubt contributes greatly to the improvement of students' writing abilities because it encourages genuine learning. He further pinpoints that the revision aspect of writing generates opportunities for novice writers to make their drafts more comprehensible, by consulting to the feedback provided, as well as immerse themselves thoroughly in the process, thus increasing the sense of owning the learning.

### Positive Attitudes Toward Writing Class

Even though these young writers confessed that they often felt confused and anxious about their writing class, several participants interestingly expressed excitement and joy. They were grateful that they had the chance to participate in both writing sessions and received encouraging feedback on their essays from the researcher. This tells that the students have developed positive attitudes toward the writing class. Participant 2 used a metaphor of puzzles in order to represent her writing experience.



Playing puzzle is confusing because we start from zero. But when I start to try making something out of puzzle pieces, creativity and ideas slowly emerged by themselves, just like writing.

The first things that I felt is doubt and fear of being wrong. The puzzle pieces that were still messy show that I was still confused and unfocused. It was hard for me to start. I kept pairing the puzzle pieces even though they were not completely perfect. Eventually, it became fun and interesting. In writing, after getting the feedback, I knew there were several mistakes. Even though it looked more difficult, I didn't feel nervous anymore because I felt like I've entered the game. So, when I have to write again, I won't be confused anymore.

**FIGURE 4** Participant 2's photovoice

Meanwhile, Participant 4 used a metaphor of a scenery in one bright day to illustrate her feelings during the writing class. She acknowledged that the process of composing a good English text was tiring, nevertheless she was enthusiastic and happy to join the writing sessions. She also stated that she would remember the experience.

The following is the photovoice documented by Participant 4.



This photo reflects my feelings when I joined the photovoice research perfectly. The scorching sun represents my enthusiasm when participating in this research, the plants were like my beautiful mood when I tried to put together the words, and the clear sky illustrates my mood when I finished my writing.

I was very excited to join this photovoice research just like that scorching sun, but sometimes I was also tired because I had to compose words and revise my writing. It turned out that thinking to find writing ideas was not an easy task. Behind it all, I was very happy to join and I will definitely remember this writing experience.

**FIGURE 5** Participant 4's photovoice

The same attitudes were also shown by other participants on their reflective journals as follows:

In this first meeting, I was excited and curious... (Participant 1, reflective journal, September 8th, 2021)

I felt happy because I could learn how to make a writing outline and a draft of an explanation text which is very important. (Participant 8, reflective journal, September 8th, 2021)

Both Participant 1 and Participant 8 admitted that they felt excited and grateful to be able to experience the writing class. Participant 8, in particular, felt happy to have had the opportunity to learn how to make a good outline and write a draft of an English essay. These positive attitudes toward writing are consistent with other participants who also expressed a mixed feeling between joy and confusion when learning to write.

The findings show that the attitude toward writing determines the way students respond to the writing tasks. When a student reflects a positive attitude, she will likely to engage herself deeply in writing practice, and the condition is proven to be stable through time ([Wright et al., 2020](#)). As a result, this type of student is inclined to radiate enthusiasm, excitement, and persistence during the writing class.

The notion of a positive attitude, being an essential factor contributing to students' writing motivation, is the manifestation of students' previous experiences. This implies that stimulating and interesting writing classes encourage a positive construction about learning to write, whereas troublesome and exhausting ones may result in students' resistance. Thus, teachers need to ensure that writing class objectives are clear, proportional, as well as attainable, and that students get the necessary assistance in their attempt to complete the assignments given ([Graham & Harris, 2016](#)). This supportive and enjoyable learning environment may leave students with good impressions and thus making writing a positive experience.

### Determination to Finish Writing Assignment

Generally speaking, most participants of the present study agreed that learning to write an English essay can be confusing as well as frustrating. Nonetheless, these novice young writers were determined to complete the writing assignments and consistently expressed enthusiasm during the writing sessions. Participant 3 used the following metaphoric picture to accompany her feelings when joining the writing sessions.



This photo has covered various important things related to me. The buds that are just starting to bloom describe my mood that is just about to start a new thing or experience in the writing class, which I have been participating in the last few days. In addition, the stems of the flower that stand firmly also illustrate my spirit which is not easily swayed and that I focused on my goals.

I have gained a lot of experiences since taking this writing class. Starting from convincing myself to be courageous to join the class to struggling to complete the assignments even though there are some obstacles that occurred. Taking this class is a new thing that is very challenging and interesting for me and also enrich my experience. Finally, when my writing has finished, I know the experience will be useful in the future.

**FIGURE 6** Participant 3's photovoice

Participant 3 stated that she was excited when she was about to start the writing class. She even later mentioned that the whole experience was challenging and interesting. Additionally, she expressed her perseverance in completing any assignments regardless the problems she faced. She stayed focus on her target as she understood that the knowledge and skills attained would be useful in the future.

What was mentioned by Participant 3 has an implication that a good understanding about the necessity of mastering writing skills for future use or success affects students' attitude and fosters their motivation to finish any writing assignments. This is in line with what is expressed by [Alberth \(2018\)](#) that confident and motivated students are more likely to exert extra effort and persist when facing learning problems.

However, secondary school teachers rarely devote special time during their teaching preparations to address this issue. They treat writing classes as a typical English lesson without necessarily taking the time to explain what invaluable advantages students will gain when they master the writing skills. As a matter of fact, as writing, though serving as an intellectual tool, also presents extreme motivational challenges ([Bruning & Horn, 2000](#)). Thus, teachers are required to be capable of not only establishing students' internal motivation to write, but to later maintain it as well. [Bruning and Horn \(2000\)](#) mentioned in their report, several strategies to do this, namely building student beliefs about writing and its' importance, getting motivational support from authentic contexts, making learning to write conditions supportive, and apply new productive approaches to writing class. In addition, [Cheung \(2016\)](#) emphasized that teachers should also teach writing process and strategies explicitly to students and demand students' discipline and hard works in order to enhance their writing competence.

## CONCLUSION

Writing in a native language can be difficult, let alone writing in a foreign language. Through this photovoice study, the participants have been empowered by self-investigating their writing journeys which will help them build critical awareness of their learning. The results show that writing an English composition is troublesome for these novice writers because of various reasons such as problems in generating writing ideas, insufficient mastery of grammar and vocabulary, confusion in dealing with sentence structures, cohesion, and coherence, and problems with revising the drafts. Yet, possessing positive attitude and strong internal motivation, these students managed to overcome any problems, and to eventually finish the writing assignment.

Despite the rigorous analysis procedures, we acknowledge that limitations remain. Unfortunately, the participants of the present study only involved students who are in the middle and above of the English ability range. Thus, future research should include low achieving students in order to understand the problems they struggle with when



learning to write. Furthermore, we did not investigate whether gender has significant effects in shaping the students' attitude and feelings about writing. We suggest future researchers to uncover this issue by utilizing a different approach such as interview and to make comparisons between female and male students' emotions where possible. We also recognized that the writing class period in this study was too short. Having more sessions instead of two would involve students in a more rigorous process of writing, thus providing specific data for similar research.

Finally, the results of this work will help secondary school teachers prepare their writing class more effectively. First, they should determine the best approach to help students generate their ideas for writing which covers selecting the most suitable brainstorming activities, giving adequate language input, and teaching important strategies of outline writing. Next, teachers need to be aware of students' problems with grammar and sentence structures. For this reason, teachers need to encourage students to independently spend extra time to master the required skills to solve the issues, or to teach these components separately as a supplement of the writing class. Additionally, in spite of the strong evidence of its importance, revising process is often overlooked. Therefore, secondary school teachers should plan their writing class carefully and to accommodate the revision phase accordingly to allow genuine learning to happen. Lastly, teachers should help students understand that writing process is generally complex and thus extremely challenging, both for novice and experienced writers. However, without doubt, writing competence help students enhance their cognitive skills which are important for their academic lives and success in the future.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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