Research Paper

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Generational differences in online shopping: millennials vs. generation z

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Article Info

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ABSTRACT

The generational shift in shopping behaviors between Millennials and GenerationZ has reshaped the retail landscape, driven by advancements in technology and social mediainfluence. This study investigates the distinct online shopping behaviors of these cohorts, focusing on their preferences, motivations, and decision-making processes. Thephenomenon of divergent generational shopping habits highlights the increasing relianceof Generation Z on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, contrasting with Millennials' methodical approach, emphasizing brand reputation and sustainability. Theprimary objective is to analyze the factors influencing each generation's shopping behavior, providing actionable insights for businesses to develop tailored marketing strategies. Thenovelty of this study lies in its comparative approach, integrating behavioral andtechnological dimensions to bridge the generational divide in online retail preferences. Findings reveal that Generation Z prioritizes visual content, convenience, and impulsivepurchases, driven by social media trends and influencer endorsements. Conversely, Millennials emphasize trust, detailed product research, and alignment with sustainabilityvalues. Recommendations include leveraging social proof and interactive campaigns for Generation Z, while focusing on transparent and ethical messaging for Millennials. Theseinsights guide brands in creating inclusive and ef ective marketing strategies that catertothe unique needs of both generational cohorts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of technology and digitalization has fundamentally transformed how consumers engage in shopping activities, particularly through online platforms. Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z are two dominant demographic groups whose behaviors shape and drive the evolution of e-commerce. Each generation exhibits distinct characteristics, preferences, and decision-making processes that influence their shopping behavior. These differences are not only significant for understanding consumer behavior but also for designing effective marketing strategies.

Generation Y, often referred to as Millennials, grew up during the early days of the internet and have witnessed its evolution. They tend to approach online shopping with a blend of rational and emotional considerations. Research highlights that Millennials are more likely to evaluate reviews, brand reputation, and discounts before making a purchase decision [1], [2], [3]. Their shopping behavior is often guided by community-driven factors and a strong emphasis on social values. Millennials value quality and long-term utility in their purchases, often seeking trusted brands that align with their ideals.

In contrast, Generation Z, born into a digitally mature world, demonstrates an entirely different approach. This generation is characterized by its adaptability to technological advancements, reliance on mobile devices, and preference for personalized shopping experiences. They are more influenced by visual content, such as photos and videos on social media platforms, as well as endorsements from influencers [4]. Generation Z places greater emphasis on individuality and immediate satisfaction, often prioritizing speed and convenience over traditional metrics like brand reputation.

The differences between these generations in terms of online shopping behaviour are particularly evident in how they interact with e-commerce platforms and consume marketing content. For instance, Millennials often engage in thorough research, reading detailed product reviews, and comparing prices across platforms before making a purchase. They tend to be more loyal to brands that reflect their values, such as sustainability and ethical sourcing. Their decision-making process is often slower and more deliberate.

On the other hand, Generation Z's shopping decisions are more dynamic and visually driven. This generation is heavily influenced by social media trends and digital aesthetics. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play a pivotal role in shaping their preferences and promoting products. Generation Z shoppers are more likely to respond to user-generated content, such as unboxing videos, product reviews by influencers, and live shopping events. This immediacy in decision-making often results in higher impulsive buying tendencies, driven by emotional appeals and peer validation. The stark contrast in shopping behavior between the two generations highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, and technological factors that influence their decisions. These insights can help businesses optimize their marketing strategies to cater effectively to both demographics.

This study aims to analyse the differences in online shopping behaviours between Generation Y and Generation Z, focusing on the factors that influence their purchasing decisions. The primary objectives include, Identifying Behavioural Patterns, exploring the unique shopping habits and preferences of Millennials and Generation Z. Understanding Influencing Factors: Examining the role of technology, social media, and emotional triggers in shaping shopping behaviours. Providing Strategic Insights: Offering actionable recommendations for businesses to design tailored marketing strategies that address the distinct needs of each generation.

Understanding the behavioural differences between these two generations is critical for businesses, as they represent the largest consumer groups in e-commerce. By catering to their unique

needs, companies can improve customer satisfaction, build brand loyalty, and maximize revenue. Additionally, insights from this study can guide policymakers in developing frameworks to promote ethical and inclusive marketing practices. For Millennials, strategies that emphasize trust, sustainability, and community engagement are likely to resonate. For Generation Z, businesses need to focus on visual appeal, interactive experiences, and the use of influencers to drive engagement. The findings of this study can also inform the design of user-friendly e-commerce platforms that cater to both generations, balancing functionality with aesthetic appeal.

1.1 Research Novelty

This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on the comparative analysis of these two generations in the context of online shopping. Unlike prior research that often examines one generation in isolation, this study emphasizes the interplay between their behaviours, identifying commonalities and divergences. The novelty lies in the integration of qualitative insights, exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of both Millennials and Generation Z through interviews and content analysis.

1.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study can help businesses adopt more nuanced marketing approaches. For Millennials, emphasizing transparency, ethical sourcing, and long-term value can drive engagement. For Generation Z, strategies that incorporate social media campaigns, influencer endorsements, and interactive content are more effective. Policymakers and consumer advocacy groups can also use these insights to promote ethical advertising practices that cater to diverse consumer needs. This research provides a roadmap for businesses to bridge generational gaps, ensuring that their marketing efforts resonate with the distinct preferences of both Millennials and Generation Z.

2. RELATED WORK

The shopping behaviours of Millennials (Generation Y) and Generation Z are distinct and have been extensively analyzed in the context of online retail. These differences reflect generational shifts in technology usage, decision-making processes, and consumer priorities. Understanding these behavioural patterns is critical for businesses to design effective marketing strategies.

[3] Highlighted that Generation Z is predominantly influenced by digital convenience, enjoyment, and visually engaging content. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok play a central role in their purchasing decisions, reflecting their preference for immediacy and aesthetic appeal. Conversely, Millennials focus more on rational decision-making, emphasizing product quality and brand reputation. Millennials often seek detailed reviews and compare prices across platforms, whereas Generation Z is more inclined toward trend-driven, exploratory shopping behaviours. Agrawal's findings emphasize the need for marketers to adopt differentiated strategies that align with each cohort's distinct motivations.

Schouten analyzed the ethical considerations shaping Millennials' shopping behaviors. Millennials tend to prioritize sustainability and align their purchases with social and environmental values. In contrast, Generation Z exhibits more individualistic tendencies, often prioritizing self-expression and peer validation over broader social concerns. That brands targeting Millennials should highlight their sustainability initiatives and ethical business practices, as these resonate strongly with this generation.

Koch and Benlian (2015) examined the psychological factors influencing impulsive buying among Generation Z. Social media platforms foster a sense of urgency and FOMO (fear of missing out), leading to impulsive purchasing behaviors. Features like limited-time offers and gamified content are particularly effective in capturing Generation Z's attention. While these strategies are effective in driving short-term sales, Koch and Benlian warn that they may not necessarily build long-term loyalty [5]. This underscores the importance of balancing dynamic marketing techniques with authenticity to ensure sustainable engagement.

[6], [7] Explored the significant role of influencer marketing in shaping Generation Z's purchasing behaviour. Influencers, through their perceived credibility and relatability, often serve as a primary source of product recommendations for this generation. The study found that Generation Z is highly susceptible to impulsive buying when influenced by endorsements. However, Lee and Watkins emphasize the importance of authenticity in influencer campaigns, noting that transparency and genuine advocacy are critical to fostering trust and long-term consumer loyalty.

[8] Highlighted the role of social proof in Generation Z's shopping decisions. This generation relies heavily on peer validation, with user-generated content such as reviews, testimonials, and unboxing videos serving as pivotal elements in their decision-making process. That businesses leverage social proof by encouraging satisfied customers to share their experiences online, thereby creating a community-driven narrative that appeals to Generation Z.

[9] Contributed to this discourse by exploring generational shopping behaviours in emerging markets. Their findings revealed that Generation Z prefers shopping online via smartphones, emphasizing speed, convenience, and personalization. Millennials, on the other hand, tend to shop online less frequently and still value the tactile experience of brick-and-mortar stores. The study underscores the importance of mobile optimization and personalized experiences for engaging Generation Z effectively.

[10] Conducted a comprehensive evaluation of Millennial and Generation Z shopping behaviours in Latvia's retail industry. Their research identified five distinct segments across the two generations: solo buyers, deal-prone shoppers, wellness-conscious consumers, influential wanderers, and premium pioneers. Among these, Generation Z exhibited a stronger preference for wellness and premium quality, while Millennials were more value-conscious. The study highlights the diversity within generational cohorts, suggesting that businesses should segment their strategies further to cater to these nuanced preferences.

The reviewed literature collectively underscores the divergent shopping behaviours of Millennials and Generation Z, shaped by their unique priorities and technological familiarity. Millennials approach shopping with a methodical mind-set, valuing transparency, sustainability, and reliability. [11], [12] Emphasize that campaigns targeting Millennials should focus on value-driven messaging and ethical transparency. On the other hand, Generation Z is more dynamic, drawn to visually engaging, influencer-driven content and instantaneous experiences. [3] and [13] highlight the importance of leveraging social proof, gamification, and influencer collaborations to appeal to Generation Z's preferences.

From a practical perspective, businesses must adopt differentiated strategies to address the generational divide effectively. For Millennials, strategies that emphasize ethical practices, quality assurance, and comprehensive product descriptions are likely to resonate. For Generation Z, campaigns should incorporate interactive elements, social proof, and real-time engagement tools [14], [15]. Additionally, marketers should remain mindful of fostering authenticity and trust across both generations, ensuring that their efforts resonate meaningfully with their target audiences.

These insights highlight the necessity of tailoring marketing strategies to the distinct needs of Millennials and Generation Z. By understanding their unique behavioural patterns, businesses can enhance engagement, build brand loyalty, and drive sustainable consumer behaviour. The integration of authenticity, visual appeal, and ethical practices into marketing efforts ensures that campaigns not only capture attention but also foster long-term relationships with consumers.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the differences in online shopping behaviours between Millennials (Generation Y) and Generation Z. A phenomenological design is adopted to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of participants from these two generations. By focusing on their unique preferences and decision-making processes, this approach allows for a deeper

exploration of the factors influencing their behaviours, including the role of technology, social media, and ethical considerations.

Participants are selected using purposive sampling to ensure they represent the two target generations. Millennials, aged 25–40, and Generation Z, aged 18–24, are recruited, with a total of 30 participants evenly divided between the cohorts. Efforts are made to ensure diversity in gender, occupation, and geographic location to capture a wide range of experiences. Data is collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually to accommodate participants from various regions. Each interview, lasting 45–60 minutes, includes open-ended questions about shopping habits, social media influences, product preferences, and impulsive purchasing tendencies.

The interviews are recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns and themes within the data. The analysis process involves familiarizing with the transcripts, coding data into recurring concepts, and developing themes that highlight generational differences. These findings are validated by cross-referencing with existing literature and conducting member checks, where participants review preliminary interpretations to ensure accuracy. To enhance reliability, a pilot study involving five participants is conducted to refine the interview questions, and triangulation is achieved by integrating secondary data from previous studies.

Ethical considerations are prioritized throughout the study. Participants provide informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality are safeguarded. Ethical approval is obtained from the institutional review board before the study begins.

This methodology ensures a comprehensive and reliable exploration of generational differences, yielding valuable insights for understanding the online shopping behaviors of Millennials and Generation Z.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Table 1. Comparison of Millennial and Gen Z Online Shopping Preferences

Key Factors	Millennials	Generation Z
Social Media Influence	3.5	4.8
Importance of Brand Reputation	4.7	3.2
Preference for Visual Content	3	4.9
Sustainability Considerations	4.6	3.1
Impulse Buying Tendency	2.9	4.7

The Table 1 compares Millennials and Generation Z across five key shopping factors, highlighting their distinct preferences. Generation Z scores significantly higher (4.8) in social media influence compared to Millennials (3.5), reflecting their dependence on platforms like Instagram and TikTok for shopping decisions. Conversely, Millennials (4.7) prioritize brand reputation more than Generation Z (3.2), emphasizing trusted and established brands.

For visual content preference, Generation Z (4.9) demonstrates a strong affinity for visually appealing campaigns, while Millennials (3.0) place less emphasis on aesthetics.

Sustainability considerations are more important to Millennials (4.6), who frequently base their choices on eco-friendly practices, unlike Generation Z (3.1), who prioritize convenience. Lastly, Generation Z (4.7) exhibits higher impulsive buying tendencies compared to Millennials (2.9), driven by emotional triggers and real-time promotions. The table underscores generational differences, providing actionable insights for designing tailored marketing strategies.
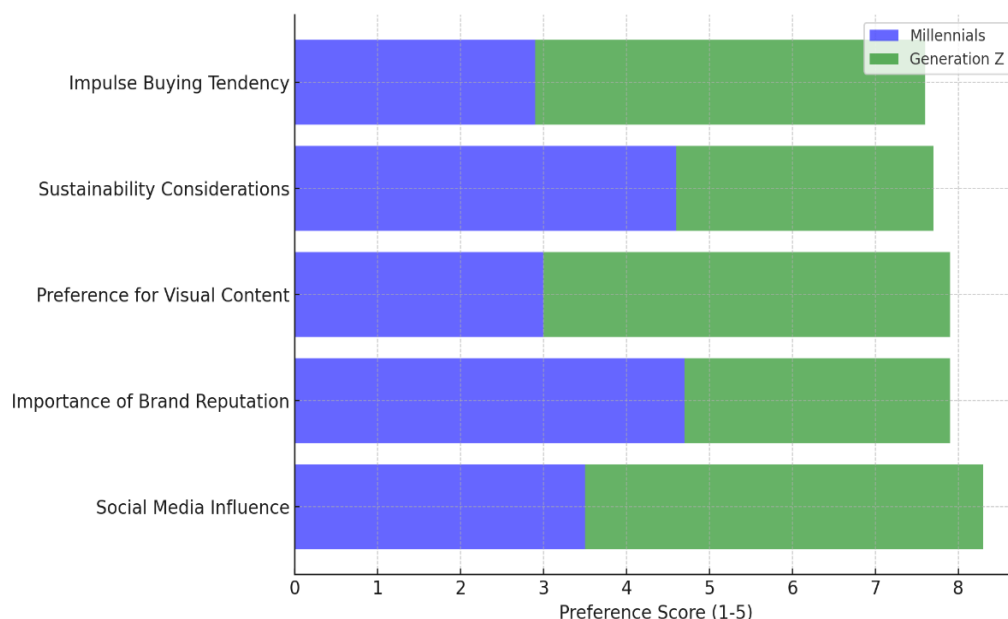
Figure 1. Comparison of Key Shopping Preferences: Millennials vs. Gen Z

The Figure 1 visually represents the scores of Millennials and Generation Z across five shopping factors. Each factor is depicted as horizontal bars, with blue bars representing Millennials and green bars showing Generation Z. The graph highlights the generational gap in shopping preferences. For social media influence, Generation Z's bar (4.8) is visibly longer than Millennials' (3.5), illustrating their higher dependence on social media for shopping inspiration.

Conversely, Millennials' bar for brand reputation (4.7) extends further than Generation Z's (3.2), emphasizing their value-driven approach. Generation Z's bar for visual content preference (4.9) is the longest, reflecting their preference for aesthetic and trendy campaigns, while Millennials' (3.0) is comparatively shorter. For sustainability considerations, Millennials (4.6) outscore Generation Z (3.1), demonstrating a stronger commitment to ethical consumption. Lastly, Generation Z's bar for impulse buying tendency (4.7) dominates, surpassing Millennials (2.9), showing their higher susceptibility to emotional triggers and real-time offers.

Social Media Influence

The data reveals that Generation Z scores significantly higher (4.8) in social media influence compared to Millennials (3.5). This indicates that Generation Z heavily relies on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok for shopping decisions. Visual campaigns and influencer endorsements play a pivotal role in shaping their preferences. Millennials, while influenced by social media, exhibit less reliance, as they incorporate additional factors like reviews and brand reputation into their decision-making process.

Importance of Brand Reputation

Millennials prioritize brand reputation more strongly (4.7) than Generation Z (3.2). This finding aligns with their tendency to research brands and ensure alignment with their values before making purchases. Generation Z, however, demonstrates a more trend-driven approach, often favouring novel and emerging brands promoted by influencers over well-established names.

Preference for Visual Content

Generation Z (4.9) shows a stronger preference for visually appealing content compared to Millennials (3.0). Gen Z's shopping behaviour is shaped by aesthetic appeal, often driven by platforms like

Pinterest and TikTok, which provide inspiration for trendy products. On the other hand, Millennials place less emphasis on visuals, prioritizing functionality and detailed product information.

Sustainability Considerations

Sustainability is significantly more important to Millennials (4.6) than Generation Z (3.1). Millennials frequently base their shopping decisions on ethical considerations, such as eco-friendliness and fair trade practices. Although sustainability is gaining traction among Generation Z, it is often secondary to convenience and style.

Impulse Buying Tendency

Generation Z exhibits a markedly higher tendency for impulsive buying (4.7) compared to Millennials (2.9). This is driven by emotional triggers, peer validation, and limited-time offers on social media platforms. Millennials, on the other hand, are more calculated in their purchases, preferring planned decisions over spontaneous ones.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal clear differences in shopping behavior between Millennials and Generation Z, emphasizing the unique characteristics of each group that influence their decision-making processes. The discussion below integrates recent literature to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Social Media Influence

Generation Z demonstrates a much higher reliance on social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, for shopping decisions compared to Millennials. Social media serves as a primary source of inspiration and validation for Generation Z, who are influenced by visually engaging content and influencer endorsements. Dabija and Lung (2018) highlighted that smartphones are the preferred device for Generation Z's online shopping, further integrating their social media habits into their purchasing processes. In contrast, Millennials engage with social media but prioritize additional research, such as product reviews and brand credibility, to inform their decisions.

Cox and Brooks (2024) explored cross-cultural shopping behaviors and found that both Millennials and Generation Z in the U.S. and France differ significantly in how often they rely on social media, with Generation Z consistently leading in frequency and dependence. This highlights the importance of social media campaigns tailored to Generation Z's preferences for immediate, visually appealing content.

Importance of Brand Reputation

Millennials exhibit a stronger focus on brand reputation, valuing long-established brands that align with their ethical and sustainability values [16]. This generational group often invests time in understanding the mission and practices of a brand before making a purchase. Generation Z, on the other hand, demonstrates a more exploratory approach, readily engaging with emerging or trendy brands promoted by social media influencers. [17] Found that while both generations value quality, Millennials are more likely to prioritize trust and consistency over novelty.

Visual Content and Aesthetic Appeal

The role of visual content is pivotal for Generation Z, who rank it among the most important factors influencing their shopping preferences. Visual storytelling, dynamic imagery, and creative campaigns resonate deeply with this cohort, as highlighted by [18].

Millennials, while appreciative of visual content, place a higher emphasis on detailed information and product functionality [19]. This distinction underscores the need for brands to focus on aesthetics and visual storytelling when targeting Generation Z while combining visuals with practical content for Millennials.

Sustainability and Ethical Consumption

Millennials show a significantly higher preference for sustainability and ethical consumption. Research by [20] emphasizes that Millennials often align their purchasing decisions with brands that support environmental and social initiatives. Generation Z, while beginning to adopt sustainable behaviors, tends to prioritize convenience and cost over eco-friendliness. [21] Noted that sustainability messaging should remain authentic and integrated into brand values to attract millennial consumers.

Impulsive Buying Behavior

Generation Z exhibits greater tendencies toward impulsive buying compared to Millennials. Features such as limited-time offers, gamification, and influencer recommendations amplify Generation Z's emotional triggers, as noted [22]. Millennials, in contrast, approach purchasing decisions with greater deliberation, emphasizing planned purchases and value-for-money considerations. [23], [24] found that hedonic motivations mediate impulsive behaviors in Generation Z, driven by self-expression and peer validation.

Technological Adaptation

Technological adaptation plays a significant role in shaping the shopping behaviors of both cohorts. Millennials are characterized by their utilitarian use of technology, employing it as a tool for price comparisons and research [3], [25]. Generation Z, being digital natives, displays a seamless integration of technology into their lifestyles, relying on smartphones not only for online shopping but also for personalized and immersive experiences such as augmented reality [10].

Cross-Cultural Differences

Recent studies, such as those [26], [27] emphasize the cross-cultural variances in shopping behaviors between Millennials and Generation Z in different regions. For instance, Generation Z in France and the U.S. shares a strong inclination toward online shopping but demonstrates differences in product preferences and spending habits. These insights highlight the importance of regional tailoring in marketing strategies to resonate with diverse consumer bases [28], [29].

Key Implications for Practice

Social Media Strategies: Brands targeting Generation Z should prioritize dynamic and visually engaging campaigns, leveraging platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Influencer partnerships are essential for driving engagement within this demographic.

1. Sustainability Messaging: For Millennials, emphasizing transparent sustainability practices can build long-term loyalty. Campaigns should highlight measurable environmental or social impacts to resonate with this cohort.
2. Impulse-Driven Engagement: Generation Z's impulsive tendencies can be effectively tapped through gamified content and flash sales. However, brands must balance these tactics with ethical marketing practices.
3. Technology Integration: Enhanced digital tools such as augmented reality and personalized recommendations can elevate shopping experiences for Generation Z. Millennials, on the other hand, appreciate practical features like detailed reviews and comparison tools.

5.   CONCLUSION

The behavioral differences between Millennials and Generation Z present opportunities for businesses to develop tailored marketing strategies. By understanding the unique motivations and preferences of each cohort, brands can create campaigns that resonate with both generations, fostering meaningful engagement and loyalty. This study highlights the distinct shopping behaviors of Millennials

and Generation Z, driven by generational differences in technology adaptation, social values, and decision-making processes. Millennials prioritize rational decision-making, brand reputation, and sustainability. They are more methodical in their purchases, often relying on product reviews and ethical practices to guide their decisions. This generational cohort values long-term quality and aligns with brands that demonstrate transparency and social responsibility. On the other hand, Generation Z exhibits a preference for visually engaging content, social media influence, and convenience.

This cohort heavily relies on platforms like Instagram and TikTok for inspiration and validation, often showing impulsive buying tendencies triggered by gamification and influencer marketing. While sustainability is becoming more relevant to Generation Z, it remains secondary to their demand for speed, aesthetics, and personalized experiences. For marketers, these findings underscore the need for tailored strategies. Campaigns targeting Millennials should emphasize value-driven messaging and trust-building, while Generation Z requires dynamic, interactive, and visually compelling approaches. By aligning strategies with the unique characteristics of each generation, brands can foster meaningful engagement and loyalty, ensuring relevance in an evolving consumer landscape. These insights provide actionable guidance for developing sustainable and generationally inclusive marketing practices.

Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Achmad Syamsudin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sabirin		✓			✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Ela Elliyana	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting

Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Informed Consent
All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Ethical Approval
The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the relevant institutional authorities.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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