

THE ATTRACTIVENESS ASPECTS THAT INFLUENCE CONSUMER LOYALTY TO HOME STAY---A STUDY IN CHINA

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 28 July 2023

Revised: 16 August 2023

Published: 28 August 2023

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, China has seen a significant surge in the popularity of home stays, particularly in culturally-rich regions like Yunnan. These accommodations, distinct from traditional hotel lodgings, promise travelers a more localized and authentic experience. This research aimed to discern the key attractiveness aspects that foster consumer loyalty to these home stays. Integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the study delved into various factors including surrounding of the building & features, marketing effect, service quality, home stay facilities, home stay operators and management, home stay price. The research findings revealed that travelers are profoundly drawn to traditional Chinese architectural styles, emphasizing their quest for authentic experiences. The setting of a home stay, especially if nestled amidst nature, further enhances its appeal. Service quality stood out as a paramount determinant of loyalty, with well-trained hosts playing a pivotal role in enhancing the guest experience. Other factors, including comprehensive amenities, effective management, and balanced pricing, also contribute to consumer loyalty. In essence, as the global travel landscape evolves, home stays in China offer a blend of authenticity, comfort, and cultural immersion, driving their growing popularity. Understanding these nuanced factors is vital for operators and policymakers alike to ensure the continued success of this sector in the Chinese tourism industry.

Keywords: Surrounding of the Building & Features, Marketing Effect, Service Quality, Home Stay Facilities, Home Stay Operators and Management, Home Stay Price, Customer Loyalty

CITATION INFORMATION: Liu, J. (2023). The Attractiveness Aspects That Influence Consumer Loyalty to Home Stay---A Study in China. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 1(8), 8

INTRODUCTION

Home stay has emerged as a thriving sector in the tourism industry worldwide, with China being no exception. Over the past decade, this distinctive form of accommodation has gained considerable popularity among domestic and international travelers alike due to its ability to provide a unique, localized experience that traditional hotels cannot offer (Liu et al., 2019). In this context, understanding the key attractiveness aspects that drive consumer loyalty to home stays is critical for industry participants and policymakers alike.

Historically, Chinese tourism was characterized by traditional hotel lodging and group travels (Cheng et al., 2020). However, with the advent of the sharing economy, amplified by the increasing influence of technology and the desire for more personalized and unique experiences, travelers' preferences are shifting towards more flexible and diverse accommodation options (Dai, 2022). According to Gao and Zhang (2019), home stays, which allow guests to rent either a part of or an entire residential property, have become an appealing alternative due to their inherent features, such as affordability, convenience, authenticity, and interaction with locals.

In China, the home stay market has been experiencing rapid growth, especially in regions with a rich cultural heritage and natural beauty (Yan et al., 2020). These accommodations provide an authentic, immersive experience, helping travelers to understand the local culture and lifestyle better, thereby adding significant value to their overall travel experience.

Despite the significant growth and popularity, there is limited research regarding what exactly makes home stays attractive to consumers, and how these factors contribute to creating and maintaining consumer loyalty. Previous studies on home stay have often focused on general benefits, such as cost and convenience, neglecting the potentially multifaceted reasons why travelers may choose home stays over other accommodations and continue to do so.

Understanding these attractiveness aspects and their influence on consumer loyalty is crucial as it can provide valuable insights for home stay operators in China to enhance their service quality, improve customer satisfaction, and consequently, drive business performance. The research could also support policymakers in formulating appropriate regulations and guidelines to further promote and regulate the home stay market. It is with this background that this research is proposed to identify and understand the attractiveness aspects that influence consumer loyalty to home stays in China.

While the home stay sector has grown remarkably in China, there remains a gap in our understanding of what drives consumer loyalty towards this form of accommodation. Several problems exist, which are outlined below:

The attractiveness aspects of home stays that foster consumer loyalty are not entirely understood. While general attributes such as cost, convenience, and the offering of a more 'authentic' experience are often highlighted, there is limited in-depth understanding of the specific factors that make home stays attractive to consumers. There could be many unexplored factors that contribute to a home stay's appeal, including but not limited to the local cultural immersion it offers, the personalized services, the interaction with locals, or the flexibility it provides compared to traditional lodging options.

According to the study of Han (2021), consumer loyalty is a complex phenomenon, especially in the context of the tourism industry where choices are often influenced by a wide variety of factors. It is essential to comprehend what makes consumers return to the same home stay or choose similar home stay experiences in different locations. The question remains, what factors lead to the creation and maintenance of loyalty in the context of home stays?

As the home stay market in China is still emerging and lacks stringent regulations, there are vast inconsistencies in quality and standards among different home stays (Zhang, 2022). Understanding the aspects that determine consumer loyalty can help in developing guidelines

and standards for home stay operators, leading to improved overall service quality and a more mature market.

Despite the burgeoning growth of the home stay market in China, there is limited empirical research specifically addressing the attractiveness aspects that influence consumer loyalty towards home stays. This dearth of research creates a knowledge gap, which, if filled, could provide critical insights for industry stakeholders.

The primary aim of this research, therefore, is to address these problems by studying and understanding the key attractiveness aspects that influence consumer loyalty to home stays in China. This research hopes to provide valuable insights that could help home stay operators enhance their service quality, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, and subsequently improving the overall health of the home stay industry in China.

This research aims to reach the following research objectives:

- 1) To identify and analyze the key attractiveness aspects of home stays that appeal to consumers in China.
- 2) To investigate how these attractiveness aspects influence consumer loyalty towards home stays.
- 3) To evaluate if the attractiveness aspects and their influence on consumer loyalty vary across different consumer segments.
- 4) To generate practical recommendations for home stay operators in China based on the insights gathered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the increasing demand for local and immersive travel experiences, homestays have emerged as a preferred accommodation choice for many travelers, especially in countries with rich cultural histories like China. Understanding the factors influencing consumer loyalty to homestays in China requires an exploration of various dimensions of attractiveness. This literature review summarizes key aspects of attractiveness that impact consumer loyalty towards homestays in China.

Surrounding of the Building & Features and Customer Loyalty

The aesthetic and functional aspects of homestay buildings and their immediate surroundings play a pivotal role in attracting and retaining customers. The setting, architectural style, and environment of a homestay can be determinative factors for consumers when deciding where to stay. This section delves into how the surrounding of the building and its features impact customer loyalty in the context of Chinese homestays.

Setting of the Homestay

Hu et al. (2020) conducted a study that delves into the preferences of travelers in China, specifically in relation to accommodation choices. Their findings highlight a noticeable inclination among travelers for homestays that embrace traditional settings. One of the driving factors behind this trend is the evocative sense of nostalgia such settings invoke. It harks back to the olden days, allowing travelers to take a step back in time and immerse themselves in a culture that is both rich and timeless. Traditional homestays, often characterized by their classical architecture, artifacts, and age-old customs, provide guests with an authentic experience. This is further accentuated by the interactions guests might have with local hosts, enriching their understanding of China's cultural heritage.

On the flip side, a study by Wei (2020) presents a contrasting narrative, especially concerning the preferences of the younger demographic. This segment of travelers, often well-versed with global trends and technological advancements, shows a predilection for modern settings when selecting their accommodations. This is not merely about the aesthetics; it's more about the conveniences and comforts these modern accommodations tend to offer. Contemporary lodgings are usually equipped with state-of-the-art amenities, from high-speed internet and

smart home systems to plush interiors and modern-day luxuries. For the younger travelers, these features can be of paramount importance, ensuring they remain connected, entertained, and comfortable during their stay.

In essence, while the allure of nostalgia and cultural immersion is potent for a certain segment of travelers in China, the younger generation's inclination towards comfort and modern amenities cannot be overlooked. This dichotomy underscores the diverse and evolving tastes of travelers, highlighting the need for accommodation providers to strike a balance or tailor their offerings to cater to their target audience.

Architectural Style

Dai (2022) emphasized the captivating nature of traditional Chinese architectural styles, particularly the Siheyuan (courtyard houses) and the Hui-style architecture. Siheyuan, a classic form of Chinese housing, is characterized by a square or rectangular layout with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms on all four sides. Its design not only provides a private and serene space within the bustling cities but also promotes a sense of communal living. Meanwhile, Hui-style architecture, prevalent in the Anhui province, is recognized by its large white walls, dark tiles, and intricate wooden carvings. These designs resonate deeply with travelers as they serve as a tangible gateway to China's ancient culture and long-standing history. For many visitors, staying in such establishments offers more than just a place to sleep; it's a step back in time, allowing them to experience a piece of China's vast historical tapestry. The fusion of East and West in architectural designs has witnessed growing popularity in recent years, as outlined by Zhang and Ma (2021). As global travel and cultural exchanges increase, many homestays in urban areas of China have begun integrating Western elements into the traditionally Chinese architectural landscape. Such designs usually involve combining the ornate details of Chinese craftsmanship with the functional and minimalistic aspects of Western architecture. The result is a unique and harmonious blend that appeals to a broad spectrum of travelers. These fusion homestays cater to those who appreciate the charm and intricacies of Eastern designs but also seek the familiarity and modern comforts of Western architecture.

With growing global attention on sustainable practices and environmental conservation, the homestay industry in China is no exception to this trend. Du (2019) identified a surge in eco-friendly architecture among homestays, a response to the escalating environmental consciousness among travelers. Modern homestays are now integrating green technologies, renewable energy sources, and sustainable materials into their designs. Furthermore, many such establishments are focusing on locally sourced materials, reducing transportation impacts, and promoting local craftsmanship. This shift towards sustainability not only caters to the ethical considerations of travelers but also promotes a holistic travel experience, emphasizing harmony with nature.

These architectural trends underscore the evolving nature of the homestay industry in China, reflecting a balance between cultural preservation, modern innovation, and sustainable practices.

Environment of the Homestay

Homestays, particularly those nestled in the heart of nature, provide not just a place to sleep, but an oasis of tranquility, a respite from the hustle and bustle of daily life. These establishments, often tucked away in serene environments, have gained immense popularity among tourists over the years. Such settings are particularly sought after by individuals yearning for peace, relaxation, and an intimate connection with nature. According to a study by Yan et al. (2020), there's a growing trend among tourists to gravitate towards these nature-inspired accommodations.

Moreover, destinations that brim with rich local culture, artisanal crafts, and long-standing traditions present an irresistible charm, especially to international tourists. There's an increasing demand among travelers to immerse themselves in authentic experiences, rather than just visit

popular tourist spots. As per a study by Li and Zhang (2021), many tourists, especially those from overseas, are eager to dive deep into authentic Chinese culture. Such tourists are keen on understanding the history, participating in traditional rituals, savoring local cuisine, and learning about ancient crafts.

However, while the allure of authenticity and nature is undeniably strong, there are some fundamental aspects that establishments must uphold to ensure the comfort and satisfaction of their guests. Safety and cleanliness top this list. Even if a homestay offers the most breathtaking views or provides a deep cultural immersion, if it lacks in terms of safety and hygiene, it's unlikely to see returning visitors. Gao and Zhang (2019) highlighted this critical aspect, revealing that for most tourists, irrespective of the ambiance and experiences offered, a safe and hygienic environment remains non-negotiable. Thus, homestay operators and local tourism bodies must prioritize these essential elements to ensure continued success in the tourism sector.

Marketing Effect and Customer Loyalty

Homestays, or lodgings in local homes offered for short-term stays to tourists, have gained increased popularity in recent years, particularly with platforms like Airbnb making them more accessible. Such accommodations promise authentic experiences, affordability, and opportunities for cultural immersion. This part seeks to understand the marketing effects of homestays and the influence they have on customer loyalty.

Homestays, deeply rooted within local communities, offer travelers a chance to delve into authentic and intimate experiences that are often missing from more commercial accommodation options. As Yan and Wen (2021) emphasizes, the current wave of tourists is no longer satisfied with just seeing a place. They want to immerse themselves in it. Their quest is to find genuine experiences, mirroring the lives of the locals. In a revealing survey, a substantial majority of tourists indicated that they preferred the essence of "living like a local" over a conventional touristy experience. This desire for authenticity transforms homestays into an irresistible proposition. It not only allows travelers to have unique cultural insights but also differentiates these establishments from their more mainstream counterparts, making them more appealing to a particular segment of the traveling population.

The significance of word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations in promoting homestays cannot be understated. The inherently personal touch and the emotional connections that guests often form during their stays at homestays make them more inclined to share their experiences. As highlighted by Liu (2020), this predisposition to share stems from the intimate nature of homestays. In today's digitally interconnected world, the influence of WOM has been magnified manifold by social media platforms. An individual's experience, be it heartwarming or less than ideal, can spread across continents in mere seconds. Such organic marketing holds immense power. While a heartening testimonial from a traveler can enhance a homestay's reputation and lead to a surge in bookings, a single negative review can taint its image, sometimes irreparably. It's this double-edged nature of WOM in the digital age that makes it an influential factor in the success or downfall of homestays.

Service quality and customer loyalty

Homestays have become a popular alternative to traditional hotel accommodations, particularly with the rise of platforms like Airbnb, VRBO, and more localized services in various countries. The intimate, cultural, and often more affordable experience that homestays offer has given travelers a new way to engage with their destinations. As with any business, the quality of service provided is a determinant factor influencing customer loyalty. This part examines the relationship between the service quality of homestays and the resulting customer loyalty.

Zhou (2010) conducted a pivotal study that demonstrated a clear and positive relationship between the quality of service provided in homestays and the loyalty of customers. This relationship hinges on the perception of guests regarding the fulfillment of their expectations.

When these expectations were not only met but exceeded, customers demonstrated a significantly higher propensity to engage in loyal behaviors. This loyalty can manifest in various ways, such as repeat bookings, word-of-mouth recommendations, and positive reviews. Wang et al. (2021) embarked on an in-depth exploration of rural homestays in China. Their research brought to light the immense value placed on personal interactions and the genuineness of the guest experience. In the context of rural Chinese homestays, guests often seek an authentic and genuine connection to the culture, environment, and people. These interactions, when perceived as genuine and personal, play a profound role in shaping guests' perceptions of service quality. This is noteworthy because, as their findings suggest, there's a domino effect in play: positive personal interactions and genuine experiences enhance perceived service quality, which then, in turn, boosts customer loyalty. This cascading influence underscores the importance of fostering genuine relationships and delivering authentic experiences in the hospitality sector, particularly in niche areas like homestays.

Home Stay Facilities and Customer Loyalty

The concept of home stays, or private residences that offer accommodation to travelers, has been prevalent in many cultures for recent years. However, with the rise of platforms such as Airbnb, the prominence and reach of home stays have expanded globally. This part aims to explore the relationship between home stay facilities and customer loyalty, providing insights into factors that drive repeat patronage in this industry.

In the realm of home stays, customer loyalty plays a pivotal role in sustaining and growing the business. Liu (2019) delved into this subject, shedding light on the relationship between the qualities of amenities offered in home stays and the likelihood of repeat visits from patrons. Their findings suggest that travelers today are not just looking for a place to lay their heads; they are seeking holistic experiences that combine comfort, functionality, and a touch of luxury. The research indicated that high-quality amenities go beyond mere aesthetics or lavishness. Instead, they encompass a range of features that enhance a guest's overall experience, from state-of-the-art kitchen appliances, high-speed Wi-Fi, luxurious bed linens, to curated local experiences or guided tours. These amenities have the potential to create a memorable and delightful stay, setting a benchmark in the guest's mind.

Home Stay Operators and Management and Customer Loyalty

Many scholars have discussed the relationship between home stay operators and management and customer loyalty as well as acquired valuable results.

The role of training in the hospitality sector cannot be understated. According to Xing (2020), investing in host training is paramount as it paves the way for a consistent and standardized service delivery. This uniformity in service, which meets or exceeds customer expectations, not only enhances guest satisfaction but also fosters brand loyalty. In essence, well-trained hosts can transform a guest's stay from ordinary to extraordinary.

Equally pivotal is the art of collecting and genuinely acting upon guest feedback. As noted by Dou (2020), proactive engagement with guests' inputs offers invaluable insights into areas of improvement and innovation. By continuously tailoring services to mirror guest preferences, operators ensure that their offerings remain relevant, consequently boosting overall satisfaction levels. This feedback loop acts as a robust mechanism for continual enhancement, enabling businesses to anticipate and address guests' evolving needs and aspirations.

It's essential to recognize that strategies to bolster customer retention are not solely the prerogative of large-scale enterprises. Even smaller entities, such as homestays, can benefit immensely from implementing measures aimed at customer retention. As per the findings of Ren and He (2021), introducing loyalty programs or providing special incentives to frequent visitors can have a pronounced impact on repeat business. Such initiatives not only incentivize guests to return but also create a sense of belonging and appreciation, further solidifying the bond between the establishment and its clientele.

Home Stay Price and Customer Loyalty

The increasing popularity of home stays as an alternative to traditional hotel accommodations has sparked significant research interest. The relationship between price and customer loyalty in this context is a topic of considerable importance to both industry stakeholders and academic researchers.

Lower prices can undoubtedly serve as an attractive lure for potential guests considering home stays. At first glance, an economical rate might capture attention and result in a booking. However, as research has suggested, the long-term loyalty of these guests hinges on several factors that transcend mere pricing. Xu and Li (2020) noted that factors such as the overall satisfaction with the stay, the perceived authenticity of the experience, and the depth and quality of the interpersonal relationship with the host play pivotal roles in determining whether guests choose to book again.

Yet, pricing still remains an integral component of a guest's experience. Extreme price discrepancies, whether they veer on the side of being too high or are perceived as suspiciously low, can indeed jeopardize guest loyalty. A particularly low price may inadvertently raise red flags for potential guests, leading them to question the quality of the accommodations or even doubt the safety of the environment. This was observed in a study by Hu et al. (2020), which highlighted the sometimes-unintended consequences of undercutting prices.

At the heart of these considerations is the perception of price fairness. If guests believe that the price they paid aligns well with the quality and experience they received, it fosters a sense of trust and satisfaction. Chen et al. (2021) emphasized the correlation between perceived value and repeat bookings. A guest who feels they've received ample value for their expenditure is not only likelier to make a return visit but also more inclined to champion the property to peers, colleagues, and friends. This word-of-mouth promotion can be invaluable, acting as a potent form of marketing for the property.

In conclusion, while pricing strategies can act as initial attention grabbers, it's the holistic experience—combining authenticity, satisfaction, and relational warmth with hosts—that truly seals the deal for lasting guest loyalty. The equilibrium between a fair price and the delivered value plays a significant role in ensuring sustained patronage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this research is to understand the factors influencing consumer loyalty towards home stays in Yunnan province, China. The study encompasses a diverse range of participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Population and Sample

The study's population comprises individuals who have experienced home stays in Yunnan province. From this population, two distinct samples are drawn. Firstly, 15 respondents are selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their extensive experience with home stays in the region. Their insights are expected to provide a detailed understanding of individual experiences and perspectives. Secondly, a broader sample of 500 customers is chosen using stratified random sampling. This method ensures that various demographic groups, such as age, income, and geographic location, are adequately represented. This larger group aims to offer a more generalized perspective on consumer preferences and behaviors.

Data Collection

Data collection is a pivotal aspect of the research, employing two primary methods. In-depth interviews are conducted with the 15 purposively sampled respondents. These semi-structured interviews strike a balance between maintaining a guided focus and allowing spontaneous exploration of emergent topics. Each interview is recorded and later transcribed to ensure accuracy during analysis. Parallely, an online survey is administered to the 500 customers in the stratified sample. Hosted on the Chinese platform “Wenjuanxing”, the questionnaire is

designed with a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. These questions delve into various facets influencing consumer loyalty, from the appeal of the home stay's surroundings to the impact of marketing strategies.

Data Analysis

Once the data is collected, it undergoes a rigorous analysis process. The qualitative data from the interviews is subjected to thematic analysis. This method is instrumental in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes, offering insights into the underlying motivations and factors influencing consumer loyalty. On the other hand, the quantitative data from the online questionnaire is processed using the SPSS software. Descriptive statistics provide an initial overview of the data distribution. Further, inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, are employed to discern potential relationships between variables.

In conclusion, this research methodology, with its dual approach, is designed to yield a holistic understanding of consumer loyalty towards home stays in Yunnan province. The blend of qualitative and quantitative techniques ensures that the findings are both detailed and representative of the broader population.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative methodologies provided complementary insights into the attractiveness aspects that foster consumer loyalty towards home stays in China, particularly in the Yunnan province.

From the qualitative in-depth interviews, several themes emerged which were consistent with the trends identified in the literature review. Many respondents underscored the significance of the traditional setting of the home stays, resonating with Hu et al. (2020)'s observations. There was a recurring sentiment of appreciation for the traditional Siheyuan (courtyard houses) and the Hui-style architecture, aligning with Dai (2022)'s emphasis on the allure of such styles. Additionally, many interviewees emphasized the tranquility and connection to nature that certain home stays provided, echoing the sentiments found by Yan et al. (2020).

The quantitative findings further reinforced and quantified some of these qualitative insights. For instance, when survey respondents were asked about the factors influencing their choice of home stays, a significant percentage pointed towards architectural style and natural surroundings. Additionally, the "living like a local" essence, highlighted by Yan and Wen (2021), was reflected in the survey with a sizable proportion of respondents stating that they preferred home stays due to their promise of an authentic experience.

Service quality emerged as a predominant factor in influencing consumer loyalty from both sets of data. Zhou (2010)'s observations about the strong relationship between service quality and loyalty were confirmed. Many interviewees detailed personal anecdotes of times when hosts went above and beyond to ensure a memorable stay, while the quantitative data displayed a positive correlation between service quality ratings and repeat bookings.

Home stay facilities, management quality, and pricing were all pivotal aspects as per the literature review, and this was supported by the research findings. Quantitative data displayed trends where higher ratings in amenities, host training, and pricing fairness were linked to stronger consumer loyalty. These quantitative trends were enriched by qualitative stories of guests who recalled specific amenities or host behaviors that made their stay unforgettable.

In conclusion, the amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative data offers a comprehensive picture of the factors influencing consumer loyalty to home stays in China. The traditional architectural allure, natural serenity, authentic experiences, outstanding service quality, superior facilities, effective management, and balanced pricing strategies all collectively play a role in driving consumer loyalty in the booming home stay market of Yunnan province and, by extension, China.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The home stay industry in China, particularly in regions rich in culture and natural beauty such as Yunnan, has undergone a remarkable transformation. This study sought to understand the driving factors behind consumer loyalty in this sector, integrating insights from both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

It's clear from the findings that the allure of home stays lies not just in one dimension but in a multitude of factors interplaying to offer a unique, genuine experience to travelers. At the forefront is the architectural appeal. The deep-rooted appreciation for traditional Chinese architectures like the Siheyuan and the Hui-style houses resonates with the tourists' yearning for authenticity. This push for genuine experiences is further mirrored in the preference for home stays that immerse guests in nature and local culture, allowing them to "live like a local." Service quality, undeniably, emerged as a critical determinant of consumer loyalty. This confirms Zhou (2010)'s assertions about the pivotal role service plays in the hospitality sector. The consistency in service, driven by adequate host training, sets the stage for not just meeting but exceeding guest expectations, leading to repeat bookings, positive word of mouth, and high customer retention.

The study also sheds light on the holistic experience travelers seek today. Beyond just an accommodation, they are in pursuit of an amalgamation of comfort, authenticity, luxury, and fair pricing. Home stays that excel in providing such holistic experiences, supported by apt amenities and management practices, are the ones that engender strong consumer loyalty.

However, while these findings are revealing, it's essential to understand that the home stay industry is continually evolving, influenced by emerging consumer trends, technological advancements, and shifts in the global and local tourism landscape. As such, continuous research and adaptation are key to maintaining and enhancing consumer loyalty.

In conclusion, the rise of home stays in China is more than just a trend; it's indicative of a deeper shift in tourist preferences towards more authentic, holistic, and localized experiences. Operators and policymakers must recognize and cater to these nuances to ensure the continued growth and sustainability of this sector. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and globalized, it's the genuine, localized experiences that will stand out, and home stays in China are uniquely positioned to offer just that.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: 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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