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Food-Related Social Media and Mental Well-being: A Conceptual Framework for Digital Food Inclusion and Social Inclusion

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ABSTRACT: The study aims to understand how food-related social media can influence people's experiences of social inclusion and mental well-being. It introduces the concept of Digital Food Inclusion to look beyond simple access to online food content and focus on participation, belonging, recognition, and psychological safety. This conceptual study brings together the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) perspective, Self-Determination Theory, the Social Identity Approach, and Social Comparison Theory. The framework considers informational, interpersonal and community-based, and representational experiences on food-related social media. The framework suggests that useful information, supportive interactions, self expression, and participation in online food communities can encourage competence, autonomy, relatedness, belonging, recognition, and social support. At the same time, idealised food, body and lifestyle representations, social comparison, judgement, and stigma may create feelings of inadequacy, distress, dissatisfaction, and withdrawal. These experiences may therefore contribute to either inclusion or exclusion depending on how people participate and experience digital food spaces. The study introduces Digital Food Inclusion as a conceptual lens that connects food-related social media experiences with social inclusion and mental well-being. It shifts attention from simply having access to social media towards the quality and nature of participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is now a key space for discovering new foods, sharing meal moments and connecting with others over daily eating habits (Rousseau, 2012; Lupton, (2018). Recipes, food photos, restaurant experiences, influencer posts, and online food communities allow people to learn about food, develop related skills, express their food preferences and identities, and interact with others (Watson et al., 2008; Lewis, (2020). These activities extend beyond the exchange of food or nutrition information. These experiences help people feel capable, exercise autonomy, form social connections, and experience recognition and belonging. At the same time, these digital spaces can also expose users to judgement, idealised images of food and lifestyles, social comparison, and pressures related to how people should eat or look (Kwon, 2020; Andersen et al., 2021; Monks et al., 2021). Thus, food-related social media cannot be viewed as entirely positive or negative; its psychosocial impact largely depends on the kind of experiences and interactions it creates for users.

This tension can be seen across different types of food-related content. While informative content can help users learn and feel more confident in making food-related choices, conflicting dietary advice, commercial motives and misleading information can also leave them confused or anxious (Melios, et al., 2025). Food related communities can create a sense of support, connection or belonging among people, but criticism, rigid group expectations, or rejection may also make individuals feel excluded from these spaces (Price, C, et al., 2022). Food, bodies, diets, and lifestyles are often presented in ways that can motivate people and encourage them to engage with food-related content (Klassen, et al., 2018). At the same time, idealised portrayals may lead people to compare themselves with others and develop feelings of inadequacy (Merino, et al., 2024). These contrasting experiences go

beyond simply shaping how individuals think about food (*Gulas et al., 2020*). They also raise important questions about whether food-related digital spaces contribute to social inclusion and mental well being, and why the same online environment may affect people differently (*Holtum 2017*.)

Existing research on food-related social media has examined several of these areas, including food information, eating practices, social interaction, body and lifestyle representations, and experiences of social comparison (*Rounsefell et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022*). However, these areas of research have mostly focused on specific experiences or outcomes, with less attention given to how they may be interconnected. In particular, there is still limited understanding of how experiences with food-related social media can contribute to feelings of inclusion or exclusion and, in turn, influence social inclusion and mental well-being. Another concern is that simply having access to food-related content does not necessarily ensure digital inclusion. Individuals may have access to such information, but this does not mean that they can understand it, make use of it effectively, participate actively in online communities, express their identities, feel accepted or recognised, or engage with others without the fear of being judged. Individuals with similar levels of digital access may still experience social inclusion in very different ways. Therefore, the important question is not simply who can access food-related social media, but how that access allows them to participate and engage.

To address this gap, this study introduces Digital Food Inclusion as a conceptual lens to understand how people participate in food-related social media spaces and the quality of that participation. It views inclusion through three interconnected dimensions: access and competence, participation and belonging, and recognition and psychological safety. The framework brings together Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, Self-Determination Theory, the Social Identity Approach, and Social Comparison Theory to explain how people may experience and respond to food-related content on social media (*Jacoby, 2002; Deci & Ryan 2012; Reicher et al., 2010; Festinger, 1957*). Informational, interpersonal, and community based, and representational experiences may encourage feelings of autonomy, competence, relatedness, belonging, peer support, and recognition. At the same time, these experiences may also lead to social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, stigma, identity threat, judgement, and a reduced sense of agency. Together, these processes help explain how food-related social media experiences may influence social inclusion and mental well-being.

Accordingly, this study proposes a conceptual framework of Digital Food Inclusion to understand how experiences with food-related social media can create both inclusive and exclusive psychosocial effects, and how these experiences may influence social inclusion and mental well being. The framework addresses three questions: RQ1: How can food-related social media experiences be viewed as inclusionary or exclusionary stimuli? RQ2: What psychosocial processes may connect these experiences with social inclusion and mental well-being? RQ3: How can Digital Food Inclusion bring these different pathways together? Rather than looking only at access, exposure, or frequency of social media use, the study focuses on how participation in digital food spaces may strengthen or limit feelings of belonging, recognition, and psychological safety. It also provides a basis for future empirical testing and development of the concept.

2. FOOD- RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Food-related social media covers different types of content related to food and eating, food photographs, including recipes, eating videos, restaurant experiences, influencer content and online food communities (*Rousseau, 2012; Kulkarni, 2025*). These experiences differ substantially in their psychological and social uses. Although a recipe tutorial, eating video, restaurant review, and discussion in a food community are all related to food, they can generate very different experiences. This study therefore views food-related social media as a psychological environment, rather than simply as a source of food-related messages. Digital food environments act as stimuli that individuals interpret psychologically and socially. The same stimulus may generate different responses depending on how it is presented, understood and experienced.

Three broad types of food-related digital experiences are especially relevant: informational, interpersonal and community-based, and representational experiences.

2.1 Informational Experiences

Food related social media provides individuals ongoing access to information about food preparation, restaurants, dietary practices, nutrition and health (*Lupton, 2018*). Users can learn how to prepare different dishes, explore new foods, share useful

advice, and access information from influencers, professionals and users ([Sokolova et al., 2024](#)). Such information can help users develop a sense of competence when they are able to understand and use what they encounter.

However, having access to information does not always lead to positive outcomes. Conflicting nutrition advice, recommendations driven by commercial interests and misleading information can sometimes create confusion. The psychological impact of such information depends on how well users can understand it, assess its relevance, and use it according to the circumstances and individual needs.

2.2 Interpersonal and Community Experiences

Food has always been a social part of everyday life, and social media has brought this aspect of food into online spaces. Individuals can share recipes, talk about their eating experiences, seek advice, exchange cultural traditions and take part in communities that share similar interests ([Lupton, 2018](#)). These interactions can help individuals feel connected and receive support from others.

Previous literature on social media suggests that active participation may be linked to social support and other positive social outcomes, although these effects can vary depending on the context. Food communities can create a sense of connection and belonging among their members ([Arcadu et al., 2025](#)). However, they may also develop unwritten expectations about what is considered appropriate in terms of food, appearance, or lifestyle, which can sometimes lead to judgement and exclusion.

2.3 Representational experiences

Representational experiences refer to how food, bodies, lifestyles, and eating habits are shown on social media. Attractive food photographs, “What I eat in a day” videos, restrictive diets, and idealised healthy lifestyle can inspire and motivate people. At the same time, frequent exposure to such idealised content may create unrealistic expectations and standards.

[Wu et al., \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that eating-related social media content is not the same across different formats, and that different types of content can have different effects on body image and eating behavior. In a similar vein, [Bonfanti et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight the role of social comparison in body image concerns and eating related symptoms. Together, these findings indicate that food-related content may have different meanings and effects depending on how users perceive and interact with it.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL FOOD INCLUSION

The proposed framework is based on four complementary perspectives. The Stimulus- Organism-Response (S-O-R) perspective provides the overall structure of the framework, while Self-Determination Theory, the Social Identity Approach, and Social Comparison Theory explain the different psychological processes involved.

3.1 The Stimulus- Organism-Response (S-O-R) perspective

The S-O-R perspective suggests that environmental stimuli first influence individuals’ internal psychological processes, which then shape their behavioral or emotional responses ([Schreuder et al., 2016](#)). In the context of food-related social media, these stimuli can include informational, interpersonal and representational experiences encountered online. The organism refers to the psychological and social processes through which individuals make sense of these experiences, such as feelings of competence, autonomy, relatedness, belonging, social comparison, and perceived inadequacy ([Jacoby, 2002](#)). These processes may then lead to different responses, including empowerment, social inclusion and improved mental well-being, but may also result in distress, dissatisfaction or withdrawal.

Thus, the S-O-R framework serves as an overarching structure for understanding these relationships rather than explaining every pathway on its own. The complementary theories help explain why exposure to the same digital environment can lead to different experiences and outcomes among individuals.

3.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory suggests that autonomy, competence and relatedness are basic psychological needs that influence an individual's well-being ([Deci & Ryan 2012](#)). Food-related social media can support these needs in different ways. For example, recipes and useful food related information can help users develop their skills and feel more competent, while sharing opinions

and expressing personal preferences can give them a sense of autonomy ([Zhu et al., 2015](#)). Similarly, interaction with supportive food communities can help users feel connected to others and meet their need for relatedness.

When these needs are supported, users may feel more confident in their abilities, socially connected and able to make their own choices. However, social media environments involving pressure, criticism or strict expectations may have the opposite effect by reducing feelings of autonomy and connection. In this way, Self-Determination Theory provides a useful basis for understanding how positive and supportive experiences on food-related social media may influence users' psychosocial well-being.

3.3 Social Identity Approach

Food is closely related to cultural, social and personal identity. The Social Identity Approach highlights how group membership, identification and a sense of belonging can influence people's social experiences ([Reddy et al., 2020](#)). Online food communities can provide opportunities for people to interact with others who share similar cultural traditions, dietary practices, interests or experiences ([Watson et al., 2008](#)).

These communities may create a sense of recognition and belonging. At the same time, shared group norms can also create differences between those who are seen as part of the group and those who are not. Food-related identity can therefore promote inclusion when different practices and forms of participation are accepted, but it can also lead to exclusion when certain food practices are viewed as better, more acceptable or morally preferable than others.

3.4 Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory suggests that people partly evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others ([Festinger, 1957](#)). Social media creates many opportunities for these comparisons, as users are regularly exposed to carefully presented images of food, bodies, lifestyles and consumption habits. [Bonfanti et al., \(2025\)](#) provide recent evidence of the relationship between social comparison on social media and body image concerns and eating-related symptoms. In food-related social media settings, people may compare themselves with others not only in terms of physical appearance, but also in relation to their meals, cooking skills, dietary habits, financial means and lifestyle. When these comparisons make other people's standards seem difficult or impossible to achieve, they may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction or withdrawal.

Thus, taking these theories together suggests that food-related social media cannot simply be viewed as either beneficial or harmful. Its effects are likely to depend on the interaction between digital stimuli, psychological processing and the conditions of participation.

4. INCLUSIONARY EFFECTS OF FOOD-RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA

4.1 Information, competence and empowerment

Food-related information can help people with everyday activities such as cooking, understanding nutrition, planning meals and making food choices ([Silva et al., 2023](#)). Having access to this information can improve an individual's understanding and make them feel more confident when making decisions. In this way, digital food environments can also serve as informal sources of learning.

However, having access to information alone does not necessarily lead to empowerment. Individuals also need to understand the information and be able to use it according to their own needs and circumstances. Therefore, the value of food-related information in making digital spaces more inclusive depends on how accessible and relevant the information is, as well as on users' ability to evaluate and engage with it.

4.2 Autonomy and self-expression

Social media gives individuals a space to share food practices as part of their identity and daily lives. Sharing recipes, traditional foods, dietary choices, and cooking experiences allows individuals to express themselves and communicate their personal relationship with food ([Rousseau, 2012](#)). This type of participation can also support a sense of autonomy, as people can share their own views and experiences with food instead of only consuming content created by others.

Food-related self expression may also help people feel recognised. Cultural foods and traditions that may not receive much attention in everyday or offline settings can be shared with a wider audience through social media. Being able to represent and share these aspects of culture can contribute to a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

4.3 Peer support and relatedness

Food-related online communities can give people a space to share their experiences, ask for advice, and support one another. This may be especially important when food-related practices involve uncertainty, changes in lifestyle, or social difficulties ([Ganglbauer et al., 2014](#)). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, these interactions may help fulfil the need for relatedness. Similarly, previous research on social media suggests that active interaction and two-way communication are more likely to provide social support than simply being exposed to content.

4.4 Belonging, identity and social inclusion

Social inclusion is not simply about having access to a digital platform. It also includes being able to participate, feel recognised, and develop a sense of belonging ([Reisdorf, et al., 2020](#)). Food-related online communities can support these experiences by bringing people together through shared dietary, cultural, or lifestyle interests.

For instance, cultural food content can help individuals stay connected to their traditions and communities even when they live in different places. In this way, participation in digital spaces can strengthen food-related social connections and provide opportunities for people to express and have their identities recognised.

5. EXCLUSIONARY EFFECTS OF FOOD-RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA

5.1 Social comparison

The same visibility that allows people to connect with others can also lead to comparisons. Users may compare their food choices, bodies, cooking abilities, diets, restaurant experiences, or lifestyles with what they see on social media. These comparisons can become concerning when people begin to view online representations as standards they are expected to meet. [Bonfanti et al. \(2025\)](#) suggest that social comparison is an important pathway through which social media experiences may contribute to body image concerns and eating-related symptoms.

5.2 Idealised food, body and lifestyle representations

Food-related social media often shows carefully selected and polished versions of food, health, and lifestyle. Attractive meals, restrictive diets, ideal body images, and well-organised lifestyles can seem appealing and may encourage people to adopt similar behaviours. However, seeing such content repeatedly may also lead to expectations that are difficult to achieve in everyday life.

[Wu et al. \(2024\)](#) show that the effects of eating-related content can differ depending on the type of content people view. This suggests that the psychosocial effects of food-related social media should not be understood only in terms of how much time people spend online. The type of content they are exposed to and the way they perceive and interpret it are also important.

5.3 Food judgement and stigma

Food is often discussed in moral terms. Words such as “clean”, “guilty”, “cheat”, “healthy”, and “unhealthy” can make everyday food choices seem like signs of self-control, responsibility, or even personal worth ([Jackson et al., 2023](#)). Such judgements can put psychological pressure on people and may make some people less comfortable participating when their eating habits do not match commonly accepted expectations. Thus, while a digital space may be accessible to everyone in practical terms, it may still feel psychologically unwelcoming or exclusionary to some users. This aspect is equally important when considering inclusion in food-related digital spaces.

5.4 Passive exposure and reduced participation

The distinction between active and passive social media use is also important. Passive use may offer entertainment or inspiration, but it may provide fewer opportunities for interaction, support, and recognition from others. [Godard and Holtzman \(2024\)](#) found that the relationship between active and passive social media use and psychosocial outcomes can vary depending on the context.

This does not mean that passive exposure should always be considered harmful. Its effects may depend on the type of content people view and on whether passive viewing encourages social comparison while reducing opportunities for meaningful participation. Therefore, the nature and context of social media use are equally important.

Table 1 shows that different types of food-related digital experiences can have very different effects on people's psychosocial well-being. These differences are not only related to being exposed to food content, but also to the way the content is presented, understood and experienced. The experience may offer support, recognition and a sense of belonging, but it may also lead to comparison, judgement and withdrawal.

Table 1: Inclusionary and Exclusionary Psychosocial Pathways of Food-Related Social Media

Food-related digital experience	Inclusionary pathway	Exclusionary pathway	Potential positive outcome	Potential negative outcome
Food information and educational content	Accessible information → competence and perceived control	Conflicting or prescriptive information → uncertainty and reduced confidence	Knowledge empowerment and self-management	Confusion and anxiety
Peer interaction and supportive communities	Reciprocal interaction → relatedness and peer support	Rejection or conflict → reduced participation	Belonging and social connectedness	Withdrawal and social isolation
Food-related self-expression	Acceptance → autonomy and recognition	Judgement → identity threat	Agency and identity affirmation	Distress and reduced participation
Cultural food content	Representation and recognition → social identity and belonging	Stereotyping → identity threat	Cultural belonging	Marginalisation
Idealised food and lifestyle representations	Diverse/realistic representation → inspiration	Idealisation → social comparison	Motivation and identification	Perceived inadequacy and dissatisfaction
Commercial / Influencer Content	Relevant and transparent content → informed participation	Promotional pressure/narrow norms → perceived pressure	Exploration and informed choice	Distrust, pressure and disengagement

Source: Author's own work

6. FROM CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES TO DIGITAL FOOD INCLUSION

The preceding discussion indicates that simply having access to food-related social media alone cannot explain its psychological effects. Although two individuals may have the same technical access to the platform, their levels of participation, recognition, and sense of belonging can be quite different.

This study uses Digital Food Inclusion as a conceptual lens to understand the quality of psychological participation in food-related digital environments. It describes the extent to which these environments allow individuals to access relevant

information, take part in meaningful ways, express their food-related identities, feel connected to others, and receive recognition without facing unnecessary judgement or exclusion.

Digital Food Inclusion is used here as a conceptual lens rather than as an established or validated construct. It shifts the focus from simply asking whether people use food-related social media to considering a more important question: what type of digital food environment do they experience?

Three dimensions are especially relevant in this context:

First, access and competence refer to whether people can find and understand relevant food-related information and make meaningful use of it.

Second, participation and belonging relate to opportunities for interaction with others, involvement in communities and a sense of social connection.

Third, recognition and psychological safety concern whether people feel able to express their food-related identities and practices without facing unnecessary judgement, stigma, or exclusion.

This conceptualisation does not assume that spending more time on social media will necessarily lead to better outcomes. Digital Food Inclusion is more about how people participate and whether participation is inclusive than about the amount of time they spend online.

7. INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

The proposed framework integrates the four theoretical perspectives within one conceptual model. In this framework, food related social media is viewed as an environmental stimulus that includes informational, interpersonal or community based, and representational experiences.

These stimuli are processed through psychosocial mechanisms. Inclusionary processes can involve feelings of autonomy, competence, belonging, relatedness, recognition and support from peers. In contrast, exclusionary processes may involve social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, food related stigma, and threats to one's identity. These processes can lead to positive outcomes such as empowerment, social support, social inclusion, and better mental well-being. However, they may also result in distress, dissatisfaction, withdrawal, and a reduced sense of social inclusion.

The framework in Figure 1 demonstrates that inclusion and exclusion can coexist, as individuals may feel supported in one online food community but judged or compared in another. To expand on this, Table 2 synthesizes the core propositions connecting these distinct social media experiences to belonging, support, exclusion, and psychological well-being to the theoretical concept.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of Digital Food Inclusion, mental well-being and social inclusion



Source: Authors own work

Table 2. Conceptual propositions and their theoretical foundations

Proposition	Proposed relationship	Principal Theoretical Basis
P1	Supportive food-related social media → autonomy, competence and relatedness → empowerment and well-being	Self-determination Theory
P2	Supportive food communities → peer support and belonging → social connectedness	Self-determination Theory, Social Identity Approach
P3	Inclusionary digital food experiences → empowerment, belonging, recognition and support → social inclusion and well-being	Self-determination Theory; Social Identity Approach; S-O-R
P4	Idealised food/ body /lifestyle representations → social comparison and inadequacy → poorer well-being and social inclusion	Social Comparison Theory

Proposition	Proposed relationship	Principal Theoretical Basis
P1	Supportive food-related social media → autonomy, competence and relatedness → empowerment and well-being	Self-determination Theory
P2	Supportive food communities → peer support and belonging → social connectedness	Self-determination Theory, Social Identity Approach
P5	Relative balance between inclusionary and exclusionary food-related social media experiences shapes overall psychosocial consequences, influencing social inclusion and mental well-being.	Integrated Conceptual framework

Source: Authors own work

8. PRACTICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

This framework has implications for social media platforms, health professionals, online communities, and everyday users. For social media platforms, Digital Food Inclusion extends beyond access to food-related content. It involves promoting diverse representation of food, bodies, cultures, and lifestyles while encouraging respectful interactions. Effective moderation may also help reduce harassment, stigma, and exclusion within digital food environments.

For health professionals and educators, digital food literacy should extend beyond assessing information accuracy. Individuals may also need support in recognising commercial content, unrealistic representations, social comparison and messages that may negatively affect psychological well-being. Within online food communities, inclusion requires respect for differences in dietary practices, cultural backgrounds, financial circumstances, and health needs, while encouraging participation rather than reinforcing narrow expectations of acceptable food behaviour.

The framework is also relevant to mental health and community practice, as online food communities can provide connection and social support. However, comparison, judgement, and exclusion may negatively influence these experiences. At the individual level, Digital Food Inclusion encourages a reflective approach to social media use, focusing on content and interactions that promote connection while recognising those that may contribute to distress or withdrawal.

Finally, the framework highlights the social inequalities in digital food environments, including differences in food access, income, nutrition knowledge, cooking facilities, and lifestyle opportunities. As a result, content that seems accessible or achievable for everyone may not be equally realistic for people living in different social and economic circumstances.

9. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future studies should analyze different types of food-related digital content such as informational, commercial, community-based, and highly visual content as separate categories, while distinguishing between active and passive user engagement. Concurrently, the proposed concept of Digital Food Inclusion requires further development through empirical testing of its core dimensions: access and competence, participation and belonging, and recognition and psychological safety. To determine the exact direction of these relationships, subsequent investigations should employ longitudinal and experimental methodologies. This line of inquiry also accounts for cultural, dietary, socioeconomic and individual variations. Additionally, examining the role of influencers, sponsored content, and platform algorithms will clarify how commercialization impacts social inclusion and exclusion.

10. LIMITATIONS

The study is conceptual and does not empirically test the relationships proposed in the framework; therefore propositions should be viewed as directions for future research rather than established causal relationships. Digital Food Inclusion is introduced as a new conceptual perspective and requires further development and validation as a measurable construct. The literature underpinning the framework is diverse in terms of platforms, populations, measures and outcomes, so the framework brings these findings together conceptually rather than assuming uniform effects. Finally, digital experiences are shaped by

wider social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Food-related social media should therefore be understood as one part of a broader psychosocial environment.

11. CONCLUSION

Food-related social media has become an important space where people learn about food, interact with others, express who they are, and engage with different communities. Its importance goes beyond food consumption, as experiences with food content online can also shape feelings of competence and independence, as well as a sense of belonging, social recognition, and comparison with others. This study argues that food-related social media cannot be viewed as simply beneficial or harmful. Access to information, opportunities for self-expression, supportive interactions and participation in online communities may help people feel empowered, connected and included. However, exposure to idealised content, social comparison, judgement about food and exclusion from online interactions may also lead to feelings of inadequacy, emotional distress and social withdrawal. The proposed Digital Food Inclusion lens brings these different pathways together by looking beyond whether people simply have access to or use food-related social media. Instead, it focuses on how people participate in these digital spaces and the quality of that participation. An inclusive digital food environment should provide access to useful information, encourage participation, recognise different identities and experiences, and offer a safe and supportive space for people to connect.

Thus, the framework can guide future research on how food-related digital spaces can go beyond simply attracting attention and engagement to support meaningful participation, social inclusion, and mental well-being.

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Author Contributions:

Author 1a: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft.

Author 1b: Validation, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing.

Author 1c: Resources, Supervision.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics statement

We confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with applicable ethical standards, institutional requirements, and relevant professional guidelines.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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