

Research Article

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Opportunities for intensive growth of the well-being of students based on interviews in Western Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The study aims to analyze opportunities for the intensive growth of youth well-being in Western Kazakhstan, focusing on factors like education, employment, technology, infrastructure, and social activity. This research addresses the regional challenges and prospects for youth development, contributing to policy-making and program improvements.

Materials/methods. A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 94 students from four universities in Western Kazakhstan. Thematic analysis using NVIVO software identified key trends and regional differences in youth well-being perception. Data reliability was ensured through member checking and methodological triangulation.

Results. The study identified key factors influencing youth well-being: practice-oriented education, youth entrepreneurship support, access to digital technologies, and opportunities for cultural development. Regional differences were also observed, such as environmental concerns in Atyrau and tourism development in Aktau.

Conclusion. An integrated approach addressing regional needs is crucial for sustainable well-being growth among youth in Western Kazakhstan. Recommendations include modernizing educational systems, promoting healthy lifestyles, supporting youth entrepreneurship, and enhancing digital skills. These findings inform targeted policies and programs aimed at comprehensive youth development.

1. Introduction

The concept of youth well-being has become a central theme in the field of research on youth development over the past decades worldwide (Benson et al., 2006; Maksatovna et al., 2021; Knissarina et al., 2024; Park, 2024; Chen, 2024). The analysis of key works in this area allows us to highlight the main aspects and trends in understanding youth well-being (Kern et al., 2015; Chaaban, 2009). Foreign studies widely use the concept of "positive youth development" (Lerner et al., 2005; Shek, 2006; Dukakis, 2009; Balsano, 2009; Geldhof, 2014; Holsen, 2017; Lerner, 2018; Wiium, 2019; Geldhof, 2019), which is closely related to the concept of well-being.

The term "positive youth development" became widespread abroad in the late 20th and early 21st century (Hamilton, 2004; Moore, 2004). Its emergence and popularity is associated with a paradigm shift in the understanding of adolescent and youth development. Benson and his colleagues at the Search Institute began using the term "developmental assets" in the 1990s, which was a precursor to the concept of PYD. Lerner is considered one of the pioneers in the field of positive youth development. He began using the term in his work in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Chaaban, 2009).

Damon (2004) suggested that positive youth development should be viewed as an approach that focuses on young people's potential and strengths rather than on their problems or weaknesses. Lerner et al. (2005) developed this idea by emphasizing the importance of the interaction between young people's individual characteristics and contextual factors in their environment. Scales et al. (2016) proposed a comprehensive model of successful young people's development, highlighting several key dimensions: psychosocial development, emotional health, life skills, ethical behavior, and civic engagement. The model emphasises the multidimensional nature of youth wellbeing and the need to consider different dimensions of development when assessing and supporting young people. Geldhof et al (2014) developed and validated a brief measure of positive youth development that effectively assesses different aspects of positive youth development. Their study showed that even brief instruments can reliably measure key components of positive youth development, which is important for practical applications and large-scale research. Catalano et al. (2004) conducted a large-scale review of positive youth development programs in the US, identifying key characteristics of effective interventions. They found that successful programs: foster positive relationships, develop competencies in a variety of areas, encourage pro-social norms, provide opportunities for positive contributions to society, and provide opportunities for youth to make a positive contribution to society.

Thus, the concept of 'positive youth development' has become popular abroad because it reflects an important shift in understanding and approach to working with young people. It emphasizes their potential, strengths, and opportunities for growth rather than focusing solely on problems and risks. It is a more optimistic and effective approach to supporting youth development that has resonated with both researchers and practitioners in different countries.

As part of the IRN AP19678139 study "Assessment of socio-psychological opportunities for intensive growth of well-being of learning youth in Western Kazakhstan", the following research question was formulated: "What socio-psychological opportunities for improving the well-being of studying youth in Western Kazakhstan can be identified through examining their opinions on education, employment, health, safety, social activity, and technology use?"

2. Literature Review

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a conceptual framework that emphasizes the strengths and potential of youth rather than focusing on their problems. The PYD model is based on the "5C" framework: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring, with an additional "C" — Contribution — added later to highlight the societal role of youth (Lerner et al., 2017). This approach

aligns with fostering personal development while encouraging active participation in community life (Benson et al., 2006).

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of PYD

PYD emerged as a counterpoint to deficit-based approaches, which focus primarily on preventing problematic behaviors such as delinquency or substance abuse. Damon (2004) emphasized that PYD fosters positive attributes in youth, such as moral values, problem-solving abilities, and social responsibility. Studies by Geldhof et al. (2014) demonstrate that even short-term PYD interventions effectively develop critical competencies.

2.2. Ecological Perspective

The ecological systems model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) underpins PYD, highlighting the influence of microsystems (family, peers, schools) and macrosystems (social and cultural norms) on youth development. Holsen et al. (2017) emphasize that PYD programs tailored to specific cultural and regional contexts yield better outcomes.

2.3. Cross-Cultural Dimensions of PYD

Cross-cultural studies (Wiium & Dimitrova, 2019) reveal variations in PYD perceptions between collectivist and individualist societies. For example, collectivist cultures, such as those in Asia, focus on teamwork and family values, while individualist cultures prioritize personal achievements.

2.4. Mental Health and PYD

PYD programs have demonstrated significant benefits for youth mental health. Chen et al. (2024) found that participation in PYD initiatives reduces anxiety and depression while enhancing self-regulation skills.

2.5. Practical Applications

PYD is widely implemented in educational and social initiatives. For instance, the "4-H" program in the United States develops leadership and entrepreneurial skills, especially in rural youth (Benson et al., 2006).

2.6. Unique Features of Our Study

Our research focuses on the regional context of Western Kazakhstan, exploring youth well-being in relation to education, employment, access to technology, and environmental challenges. Key findings include:

- Regional diversity: Environmental concerns in Atyrau and tourism development opportunities in Aktau highlight the need for localized strategies.
- Practical implications: Recommendations such as modernizing educational curricula, fostering youth entrepreneurship, and improving infrastructure address both global and local priorities.
- Digital technology: Access to technology emerged as a critical factor in education and career development.

These findings underscore the importance of adapting PYD principles to local conditions, making our study a valuable contribution to understanding youth development in diverse contexts.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, focusing on exploring the subjective perspectives of young people studying in various cities across Western Kazakhstan. We employed a qualitative

approach through phenomenological research, conducting data collection in natural settings where participants responded to questions in their familiar environment.

The study encompassed 94 participants from four cities in Western Kazakhstan: 28 from Aktobe, 25 from Uralsk, 18 from Aktau, and 23 from Atyrau. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 21 years. The selection process utilized purposive sampling among students within the specified age range in these cities. The primary inclusion criterion was current enrollment in an educational institution within the target cities, while exclusion criteria comprised non-student status and age outside the specified range.

Data collection occurred between February 28 and May 20, 2024, through semi-structured interviews conducted at four universities: Marat Ospanov West Kazakhstan Medical University, Yessenov University, S. Baishev Aktobe University, and Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau State University. Each interview session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

The interview guide was structured around six primary sections (civic participation, economic opportunities, education, healthcare, information and communication technologies, and occupational safety), derived from the youth development index calculation methodology developed by the "Youth" Research Center of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Prior to full implementation, a pilot test involving five participants was conducted to refine the interview questions.

The study maintained rigorous ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent, with additional parental consent obtained for those under 18 years of age. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. The study received approval from the Scientific Council of Marat Ospanov West Kazakhstan Medical University.

To ensure research reliability and validity, we implemented member checking, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts, and methodological triangulation, utilizing field notes alongside interview data. To mitigate potential bias, researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting their thoughts, reactions, and potential preconceptions throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Regular debriefing sessions were conducted, during which team members critically examined each other's interpretations and challenged assumptions to enhance the credibility of interpretations while acknowledging the inherent subjectivity in qualitative research.

Data analysis was facilitated through NVIVO software, selected for its comprehensive capabilities in organizing and analyzing qualitative data and its collaborative features. The coding process proceeded through multiple stages: initial open coding was conducted independently by two researchers, followed by code comparison and refinement through discussion to develop a codebook. Axial coding was employed to identify relationships between codes, culminating in selective coding for theme integration. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.85, indicating strong agreement.

The primary methodological limitation of this study lies in its exclusive use of a qualitative approach, which constrains the ability to quantitatively assess and generalize findings to the broader youth population across the Republic of Kazakhstan.

4. Results

As part of the interview-based qualitative research, we identified a number of key themes that were most frequently raised by interviewees (Table 1-2). To illustrate the relative importance of these themes, we conducted thematic analyses and presented the frequency of mention of each theme as a percentage of the total number of interviewees. The quantitative data is for illustrative purposes only and is not statistically representative but reflects the trends identified in the qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis of the interviews showed that education and professional development, as well as employment and career development were the most frequently discussed issues among students. Considerable attention was paid to the problems of urban infrastructure, ecology and healthy lifestyle, which indicates the multifaceted nature of factors influencing young people's perception of well-being.

Table 1. Main topics mentioned by interviewees (percentage of total number of interviewees)

Themes	Percentage
Education and professional development	85%
Employment and career advancement	78%
Urban infrastructure and environment	72%
Health and healthy lifestyle	65%
Use of information technology	60%
Social activity and community life	55%
Safety and security of rights	45%

The analysis of Table 1, "Main Topics Mentioned by Interviewees," demonstrates the predominant significance of the educational and professional sphere, where 85% of respondents emphasized education and professional development issues. Employment and career growth problems also show substantial statistical representation (78% of respondents). Urban infrastructure and environmental issues occupy the third position in frequency of mention (72%). It should be noted that more than half of the interviewees addressed aspects of health preservation (65%), information technology competency (60%), and social engagement (55%). Security and legal protection issues constituted the smallest but statistically significant proportion (45%).

Table 2. Regional characteristics (percentage of mentions within cities):

Problem/Need	Aktobe	Uralsk	Aktau	Atyrau
Ecology	75%	40%	50%	85%
Road quality	70%	60%	80%	65%
Public transport	50%	85%	45%	55%
Tourism development	30%	35%	70%	40%
Educational opportunities	80%	75%	85%	70%
Employment	75%	80%	70%	75%
Cultural and leisure sphere	60%	75%	65%	55%

The results of comparative analysis of regional characteristics presented in Table 2 reveal substantial differentiation of issues across territories. Environmental concerns show the highest indicators in Atyrau (85%) and Aktobe (75%), which correlates with the industrial specifics of these regions. Infrastructure problems, particularly road quality, are most relevant for Aktau (80%). Transport accessibility represents the greatest concern among respondents in Uralsk (85%). The region's tourism potential received maximum significance assessment in Aktau (70%). Educational opportunities demonstrate high significance across all studied locations with peak values in Aktau (85%). Employment issues are characterized by relative homogeneity of indicators with slight

prevalence in Uralsk (80%). The development of cultural and leisure infrastructure received the highest significance assessment among respondents in Uralsk (75%).

To illustrate the key themes identified in the analysis, representative quotes from the interviews are provided below (Table 3):

Table 3. Quotes from interviews

Code/theme	Comments / Quotes
Civic participation and social engagement	<p>Many interviewees expressed a desire to be more active in public life but face obstacles, for example, a student from Aktobe, noted: "...the fact that I am a student. Many students of medical universities..." - referring to the lack of time due to studies. This view is shared by many others, pointing to the busyness of university studies as a major obstacle to full social activity.</p> <p>Some young people show interest in volunteering and community initiatives, for example, an interviewee from Uralsk suggested: "... there are no centres in the city where the issues of leadership, benefits for society are raised... I would really like to participate in these kinds of events, but I don't know where they take place...", demonstrating the desire of young people to be heard and involved in solving social problems.</p>
Economic opportunities and employment	<p>The problem of employment proved to be one of the most acute for young people in all regions. Many noted difficulties in finding a job without experience. As one interviewee from Atyrau put it: "... they always ask for work experience, they rarely accept young specialists".</p> <p>Some young people see the solution in developing entrepreneurship, an interviewee from Aktau suggested: "... business grants, low mortgage rates" as a way to support young people.</p>
Education	<p>The quality and accessibility of education is a concern for many interviewees. The need for more practice-oriented training was frequently mentioned. A student from Aktobe noted the need for "... training would be much more effective if it was based on the hospital or polyclinic itself..., until the 3rd year we learn dry theory, it is very difficult... the best teachers are practicing doctors, each topic is practised with real life cases...".</p> <p>Many expressed a desire to have the opportunity to study abroad or participate in exchange programs, reflecting the desire of young people to gain a variety of experiences and knowledge.</p>
Health and healthy lifestyle	<p>Health problems, especially those related to modern lifestyles, were frequently mentioned by interviewees. Many spoke about problems with eyesight, stress, lack of sleep. As one interviewee from Aktobe noted: "... eyesight, as many people now work on computers and phones. Obesity, because of improper nutrition".</p> <p>Young people show interest in healthy lifestyles but note the lack of accessible sports facilities and high prices for healthy food in their cities.</p>

Use of information technology	Technology plays a significant role in the lives of young people. Many noted the importance of access to quality internet and modern devices for study and work. An interviewee from Aktau offered: "I can't do without my phone, or rather without the internet, as my whole life is in it...yes, I spend a lot of time on useless information, but study and work require the constant presence of the internet in my life; it has the bank and family and applications for study, health and leisure...with the advent of GPT, many things have become automated and it's great..., this reflects young people's active use of technology in everyday life.
Safety and security	<p>Students expressed concern about the level of crime, not only against women and girls. An interviewee from Uralsk noted the problem of "attacks at night and on young people, as every city has a disadvantaged neighbourhood".</p> <p>Many argued for better co-operation between young people and law enforcement agencies, which are more fearful of them than caring and protecting them.</p>

5. Discussion

The analysis of interviews shows that the low civic and social activity of students is caused by a complex of factors. The main reason is the lack of time due to the intensive academic workload, especially for medical students. Young people often face a lack of information about opportunities for participation, financial constraints, and lack of motivation, not seeing a direct link between social activity and their future. Some interviewees expressed distrust in the effectiveness of civic participation or felt insecure due to lack of experience. Language barriers and a focus on personal development also play a role. As a result, despite potential interest in civic life, many students preferred to focus on their studies and career building, postponing active civic participation for the future.

The main barrier to economic opportunities and employment is the requirement of work experience from employers, which creates a vicious circle for university graduates: without experience one cannot get a job, and without a job one cannot gain experience. Many interviewees noted the lack of practical skills acquired during their studies, which reduces their competitiveness in the labor market. Financial difficulties, including low starting salaries and high housing prices, limit young people's opportunities. Some mentioned the problem of nepotism and corruption in employment. The lack of a clear link between education and labor market needs, as well as insufficient support for youth entrepreneurship, exacerbates the situation. As a result, many young people have difficulties in starting a professional career and achieving financial independence.

Young people in training seek more modern, practice-oriented and flexible education. Interviewees stressed the need to strengthen the practical component of education, allowing them to acquire skills that are in demand in the labor market. Many expressed a desire to have access to international educational programs and opportunities to study abroad. An important aspect is the integration of modern technologies in vocational training. Young people noted the need for more grants and scholarships to ensure access to quality education. They would like to have such education that would allow them to vary depending on the need and vacant position, according to the type of double major, for example, educator- speech therapist; therapist-cardiologist, etc. Interviewees mentioned the importance of improving the quality of teaching and updating curricula in line with current labor market requirements and global trends.

Young people realise the importance of health and healthy lifestyle, showing interest in sports and proper nutrition. However, there is a lack of accessible sports facilities and high prices for healthy food in the cities. Students mentioned a wide range of problems affecting their health: from traditional bad habits such as smoking, alcohol consumption, addiction to gadgets, computer games and sedentary lifestyles. Interviewees mentioned vision problems, stress and sleep deprivation associated with intense study loads. Some talked about the prevalence of drug abuse and unsafe sexual behavior. Despite these challenges, young people generally expressed a desire for more opportunities to lead healthy lifestyles, including accessible sports clubs, educational programs on healthy eating, and psychological support.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of ICTs for study, work and daily life, expressing a need for quality and accessible internet, modern devices and digital educational resources. However, the real situation does not always fulfill these needs. Students mentioned problems with internet connection, especially in remote areas and rural areas. Some noted that their educational institutions are not adequately equipped with modern equipment. Financial constraints also affect access to ICTs, as not everyone can afford modern devices. Despite these challenges, young people are highly interested in digital technologies and see their potential to improve their education and career opportunities. Many expressed a desire for more ICT skills, especially in the context of future employment.

A mixed picture was revealed with regard to student safety. A number of concerns were mentioned by interviewees. Concerns related to street crime, safety when travelling around the city especially during dark hours were frequently mentioned, not only for girls. Problems with street lighting and the presence of "dangerous neighbourhoods" in cities were mentioned. In Atyrau and Aktau, interviewees mentioned environmental risks associated with industrial pollution. Road safety problems, including traffic violations by moped and scooter riders. Some students mentioned risks related to cyber security and online fraud. At the same time, many interviewees expressed a lack of trust in law enforcement and the security system in general. However, it is worth noting that perceptions of security vary depending on the particular city and neighbourhood of residence. In general, students expressed a need for better security measures, including more effective police work, improved urban infrastructure (lighting, surveillance cameras) and increased awareness of personal security measures.

The results of the interviews showed that young people in different cities of Western Kazakhstan face similar problems, but also have their own regional peculiarities. Young people take an active interest in improving their lives and their communities, but often face barriers in the form of lack of resources, opportunities or support. Their responses reflect a desire for quality education, decent work, healthy lifestyles and active participation in society.

Common features for all four cities:

- Aspiration for quality education and the need for practice-oriented learning;
- Employment issues, especially for young specialists without work experience;
- Interest in a healthy lifestyle and the need for accessible sports facilities;
- Importance of using information technologies in daily life and studies;
- Desire to participate in public life, but facing obstacles (most often lack of time due to studies);
- Concern about personal safety issues and the quality of urban infrastructure.

Table 4. Differences by cities

City	Differences
Aktobe	<p>Special emphasis is placed on environmental problems and the lack of green spaces.</p> <p>The need to improve urban infrastructure, especially roads.</p> <p>Mentioning problems with street lighting.</p>
Uralsk	<p>Strong emphasis on the problems of public transport (high prices, insufficient quantity).</p> <p>The need for the development of the cultural and leisure sector, in particular, the opening of entertainment centers.</p> <p>Mentioning employment problems more often than in other cities</p>
Aktau	<p>The focus is on the development of the tourism potential of the region.</p> <p>Mentioning problems with the quality of roads and urban infrastructure.</p> <p>Interest in the development of the IT sector and technological education.</p> <p>Problems with accessibility of higher education in the region (mention of the need to open new universities).</p>
Atyrau	<p>Strong emphasis on environmental issues, especially air and water pollution.</p> <p>Mention of the need to move the refinery outside the city.</p> <p>Problems with the quality of medical services are mentioned more often than in other cities.</p> <p>The need for the development of social infrastructure.</p>

It is important to note that although these differences are noticeable, they are not absolute. In each city there are answers concerning all the mentioned problems, but the frequency and accents vary.

These differences reflect the specifics of each region: the industrial character of Atyrau, the tourist potential of Aktau, the problems of the fast-growing city of Aktobe and infrastructural challenges in Uralsk. However, despite regional differences, young people in all four cities share a common desire for better education, decent work and active participation in society.

Based on the analysis of international research and obtained results, we can identify the convergence of several factors determining youth well-being. The multidimensional nature of student well-being revealed in this study aligns with the conceptual model proposed by Kern et al. (2015), which integrates educational and socio-psychological components into a unified system of well-being assessment.

The regional differentiation of well-being indicators identified during the study demonstrates high congruence with the methodological approach of Chaaban (2009), which posits the necessity of implementing local indicators in youth well-being assessment systems. The empirical data obtained from the study validate theoretical propositions about the significance of territorial specification in developing youth well-being assessment tools.

The correlation identified in the study between practice-oriented learning and positive youth development dynamics finds theoretical foundation in the conceptual frameworks of Benson et al.

(2006). Moreover, the documented regional characteristics, particularly environmental issues in Atyrau, demonstrate the unique specifics of youth development in the context of Western Kazakhstan, contributing significantly to expanding theoretical understanding of factors determining youth well-being in various sociocultural contexts.

Thus, comparing theoretical propositions from international research with our obtained results allows us to acknowledge both common trends in youth well-being development and specific regional characteristics. This observation emphasizes the necessity of considering both global theoretical concepts and local sociocultural practices when developing youth well-being programs in a specific region.

6. Conclusion

The presented research results will provide unique opportunities for intensive growth in the well-being of studying youth from their own perspective. Key aspects of these opportunities include: modernization of the educational system considering global trends and labor market needs; development of an effective career guidance and employment support system; promotion of a healthy lifestyle and expanding access to sports infrastructure; stimulating social activity and civic participation of youth; ensuring access to modern technologies and developing digital skills; supporting cultural development and creative initiatives; improving financial literacy and creating opportunities for economic independence; addressing housing issues; and fostering environmental awareness. The realization of these opportunities is currently being implemented through state policy via a number of programs, such as "Youth Practice", "Enbek", "With a Diploma to the Village", "Zhasyl EI", "Technological Breakthrough through Digitalization, Science and Innovation" for 2021-2025, and others. However, coordinated efforts are required from the state, educational institutions, businesses, and the youth themselves, taking into account the regional characteristics of Kazakhstan, which will create favorable conditions for the comprehensive development and enhancement of the well-being of the country's young generation in the future.

7. Suggestion

Based on the identified needs of youth during the study, the following implementation strategy for recommendations is proposed:

Educational system modernization requires a structured approach through establishing a three-way partnership "university-employer-student". The implementation mechanism includes: forming coordination councils with regional enterprise representatives to update educational programs; introducing a dual learning system with workplace assignments for each student at partner enterprises; developing individual educational trajectories with opportunities for additional specialization.

Employment challenges can be addressed through creating regional career development centers with functions including: organizing paid internships with subsequent employment; subsidizing young specialists' salaries during their first year of work (following the "Youth Practice" program experience); establishing tax preferences for enterprises that employ university graduates without work experience.

Urban infrastructure development requires a differentiated approach considering regional specifics. For Atyrau, the priority is establishing an environmental council with industrial enterprises' participation and developing a production facilities modernization program to minimize emissions. In Aktau, attracting private investment through public-private partnerships for tourism infrastructure development is necessary. For Uralsk, implementing an electronic ticketing system and updating the vehicle fleet through leasing mechanisms is optimal.

Access to modern technologies can be provided through implementing the "Digital Student" program, which includes: creating preferential credit products for digital device acquisition; deploying free Wi-Fi networks in student dormitories and campuses; establishing digital competency centers at universities with regional IT companies' involvement.

Creating a safe urban environment requires coordinating efforts between law enforcement agencies, city authorities, and educational institutions through: establishing student police assistance units with material incentives for participants; implementing a "Safe Campus" system with surveillance cameras and emergency buttons; organizing regular meetings between law enforcement representatives and the student community.

Each proposed measure should be integrated into existing state youth policy development programs with targeted funding allocation and responsible executors appointed at the regional level. The effectiveness of proposed measures implementation should be evaluated through quantitative and qualitative indicators with annual monitoring of student satisfaction.

The proposed recommendations are based on empirical data from the study and aim to provide comprehensive solutions to the identified challenges while considering regional specificities and resource availability. Success in implementing these measures depends on effective coordination between stakeholders and consistent monitoring of progress toward established goals.

Declarations

Author Contributions. The authors made the same contribution. All authors have read and approved the publication of the final version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ethical Approval. The study was approved by the Scientific Council of the West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. For participants under 18 years of age, parental consent was also secured.

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

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