WOMEN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL WELFARE
VOL. 3 NO. 2 (2026)

ISSN: 3064-2469

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To cite this article: F. Nurpika, I. Fahri, and M. Thontawi, "Teacher Strategies for Strengthening Learning Motivation in Islamic Religious Education: An Exploratory Case Study in an Indonesian Public Senior High School," Women, Educ. Soc. Welf., vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 732–747, 2026.. https://doi.org/10.70211/wesw.v3i2.651

Published online: June 30, 2026

OPEN ACCESS

https://doi.org/10.70211/wesw.v3i2.651

Women, Education, and Social Welfare Vol 3 No 2 (2026)

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Research Article

Teacher Strategies for Strengthening Learning Motivation in Islamic Religious Education: An Exploratory Case Study in an Indonesian Public Senior High School

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Received: March 14, 2026	Revised: May 19, 2026	Accepted: June 22, 2026	Online: June 30, 2026

Abstract

Learning motivation is central to inclusive student support because it shapes whether learners attend to, participate in, and persist with classroom activity. This exploratory qualitative case study examines documented preliminary observations of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) instruction in Grade X E8 at an Indonesian public senior high school. The evidence concerns one IRE teacher and a class of 34 students. The analysis identifies a heterogeneous motivation profile: some students were attentive and participatory, whereas others were less focused, hesitant to respond, or minimally involved. Teacher practices comprised aperception, communication of learning objectives, motivational prompts, everyday-life examples, lectures, question-and-answer, and discussion. The findings are synthesized as a Motivational Alignment Cycle linking value framing, participation architecture, relational reinforcement, and responsive observation. The contribution is a context-sensitive framework that explains why method variation alone may not be sufficient unless students also perceive relevance, psychological safety, and attainable opportunities to contribute. The study informs teacher professional development and school-level psychosocial support in IRE and comparable value-oriented subjects. Because the source evidence is preliminary and does not include completed interviews, transcripts, or outcome measures, the article makes no causal or generalizable effectiveness claims.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education; Learning Motivation; Teacher Strategy; Student Engagement; Secondary Education.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge or the memorization of normative concepts. Its broader educational purpose is to cultivate reflective understanding, ethical orientation, and religiously informed practice in ways that can guide students' choices within everyday social life. In this sense, IRE is inherently concerned with how learners make meaning of values, connect those values to concrete situations, and develop the willingness to act upon them. Scholarship on Islamic education similarly positions learning as inseparable from moral formation, personal responsibility, and the development of human agency [1], [2]. In public secondary schools, this mandate creates a pedagogical challenge: teachers are expected not only to explain religious content accurately, but also to organize learning experiences that allow students to recognize why the content matters, discuss it safely, and relate it to real decisions, relationships, and responsibilities. When such connections are weak, students may understand that a topic is important in principle while remaining reluctant to invest attention, effort, or voice during classroom learning.

The issue is particularly consequential in senior high school classrooms, where students may enter IRE lessons with diverse prior experiences, confidence levels, interests, and expectations about participation. A class can therefore include students who readily answer questions, volunteer perspectives, and follow classroom activities, alongside students who are quiet, hesitant, distracted, or uncertain about the value of contributing publicly. These differences should not be reduced to a simple distinction between "motivated" and "unmotivated" learners. Rather, they signal that motivation is shaped by the interaction between learner characteristics, instructional design, classroom relationships, and the immediate opportunities students perceive for successful participation. In Indonesian IRE research, teacher strategy has repeatedly been identified as a practical leverage point for nurturing students' learning motivation; however, many local accounts remain descriptive, focused on reporting methods used by teachers rather than clarifying how those methods may create motivational conditions in particular classrooms [3]. A more conceptually grounded account is needed to explain why the same instructional method can invite engagement from some students while leaving others silent or only minimally involved.

Contemporary motivational scholarship provides an important foundation for addressing this question. Self-determination theory differentiates between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation and emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting sustained engagement [4], [5]. Applied to IRE, autonomy does not mean leaving students without guidance or treating all interpretations as equally appropriate; instead, it concerns offering meaningful reasons for learning, acknowledging student perspectives, and creating opportunities for purposeful contribution. Competence concerns whether students believe that they can understand the material, formulate a response, and meet the demands of classroom tasks. Relatedness concerns whether students experience the teacher and peers as respectful, attentive, and safe sources of support. Together, these needs help explain why encouragement alone may not be sufficient when students do not yet see a task as manageable, relevant, or socially safe.

Expectancy-value theory further clarifies that students' willingness to invest effort is influenced by their beliefs about competence and by the value they attach to the learning task

[6]. In an IRE lesson, a student may be more prepared to participate when the lesson objective is clear, the task appears attainable, and the topic is connected to issues that the student recognizes from daily life. Conversely, even well-intentioned activities may generate limited engagement when students cannot see the purpose of the task, cannot anticipate what a satisfactory response looks like, or fear that their response will be judged negatively. This perspective directs attention beyond the presence of teaching methods toward the meanings that students attach to those methods. It also highlights the importance of instructional sequences in which teachers explain the relevance of a topic, provide structure for participation, and make successful engagement appear feasible rather than reserved for the most confident students.

Teacher behavior is central to the formation of these conditions. Research on motivating styles indicates that teachers may operate in more controlling or more autonomy-supportive ways, with the latter emphasizing meaningful rationales, acknowledgement of student viewpoints, and opportunities for initiative [7]. Yet autonomy support should not be interpreted as the absence of structure. Evidence shows that student engagement is better served when autonomy support and instructional structure are combined: students need both meaningful choice or voice and clear expectations, guidance, and feedback [8]. Moreover, students' perceptions of teacher need-supportive practices are associated with the satisfaction of their psychological needs [9]. For IRE teachers, this suggests that motivational practice should include more than exhortations to be diligent or morally responsible. It should include understandable goals, accessible examples, appropriate scaffolding, adequate preparation time, and teacher responses that encourage students to contribute without embarrassment when their answers are incomplete or tentative.

Learning motivation also becomes meaningful in classroom research when it is examined through its visible manifestations. Engagement is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive involvement [10]. Behavioral engagement may be visible in attending to a lesson, asking questions, joining discussions, completing tasks, or responding to prompts. Emotional engagement may be reflected in interest, enjoyment, belonging, or the absence of excessive anxiety during participation. Cognitive engagement concerns the effort students devote to interpreting ideas, using learning strategies, and regulating their own understanding. These dimensions develop within a wider ecology of school, classroom, peer, and family-related influences rather than solely within the individual learner [11]. Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that affective teacher-student relationships are associated with stronger engagement and achievement [12], while students' knowledge of learning strategies and their willingness to use them are closely connected to motivational conditions [13]. Accordingly, the study of teacher strategy in IRE should consider not merely whether students comply with an activity, but whether classroom practices make attentive, confident, and reflective participation more likely.

The role of relevance is especially important in value-oriented subjects. Students are more likely to invest in learning when they can identify a practical, personal, or social reason for doing so. Utility-value interventions, for example, have demonstrated that helping learners recognize the usefulness of academic material can strengthen interest and performance [14]. Related scholarship argues that interest develops when students perceive educational work as

meaningful rather than distant from their concerns [15]. A broader meta-analytic review also indicates that motivation interventions can have positive academic effects when their design is responsive to learner needs and classroom conditions [16]. These insights are directly relevant to IRE because religious and ethical themes may be presented abstractly unless teachers deliberately connect them to dilemmas, relationships, responsibilities, media use, community life, or other situations that students can recognize. However, contextualization should not be treated as a decorative addition to content delivery; it must be accompanied by opportunities for students to interpret, question, and apply ideas in ways that are proportionate to their readiness.

At the same time, relevance alone does not guarantee participation. Interpersonal relationships remain central to motivation, engagement, and achievement because students interpret instructional demands through the quality of their interactions with teachers and peers [17]. Longitudinal research has likewise identified teacher autonomy support as an important contributor to student engagement, while also emphasizing the need for more observation-based evidence about how concrete classroom practices operate over time [18]. For a student who is unsure of their understanding or who anticipates social risk, an open question may feel less like an invitation and more like a test of public competence. The teacher's response to partial answers, moments of silence, or uncertainty can therefore shape the extent to which future participation appears safe. In an IRE classroom, where discussion may involve moral commitments and personal interpretations, relational sensitivity is particularly important. Teachers must uphold the integrity of learning while also ensuring that students are not excluded from participation because they lack confidence, time to formulate a response, or assurance that mistakes will be treated constructively.

Within recent IRE scholarship, several practices have been associated with stronger student participation and motivation, including reinforcement, interactive discussion, relevant learning media, personal approaches, and variation in teaching methods [19], [20]. Research has also explored innovative digital media in IRE learning and the development of more inclusive IRE curricula and practices [21], [22]. These developments indicate that the field increasingly recognizes the need to move beyond one-way delivery toward pedagogies that are responsive to learners' contexts and differences. Nevertheless, the use of media or varied methods should not be assumed to produce engagement automatically. Digital resources may attract initial attention, but their motivational value depends on whether they support understanding, invite active processing, and are integrated into a classroom climate where students can respond meaningfully. Similarly, an inclusive curriculum requires more than formal access; it requires participation structures that enable different students to enter discussion, demonstrate understanding, and receive support appropriate to their needs.

Broader educational research reinforces this interpretation. Teacher emotional support can motivate students partly through their perceptions of peer relatedness, autonomy support, and competence [23]. Student learning behavior also interacts dynamically with the learning environment, meaning that engagement can change as classroom conditions change [24]. Scaffolding has been shown to matter for motivation, engagement, and learning because it helps learners approach tasks that might otherwise appear too difficult or ambiguous [25]. In addition, systematic evidence on perceived teacher support emphasizes its relevance to student engagement [26]. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that a teacher strategy should be

interpreted as an integrated set of conditions rather than as a checklist of isolated techniques. A lecture, discussion, question-and-answer exchange, or everyday-life example may each serve a motivational function, but the function depends on how the practice is sequenced, explained, received, and adjusted in response to students' actual participation.

Despite this growing body of knowledge, three limitations remain salient in the literature relevant to IRE classrooms. First, many studies identify strategies as lists of methods such as discussion, motivation, reinforcement, media use, or personal approaches without explaining the process through which those strategies connect value, competence, relationship, and participation. Second, the presence of a strategy is often discussed as though it were evidence of effectiveness, even when the evidence does not distinguish what teachers did from how students experienced or responded to the practice. Third, public senior-high-school contexts in Jambi remain underdocumented, particularly where a classroom displays heterogeneous patterns of attention and verbal participation. Addressing these gaps requires an analytic approach that is sufficiently theoretical to interpret classroom practice, yet sufficiently cautious to avoid causal claims that exceed the available evidence.

This article addresses the gaps by examining the initial observation record from an IRE class in Grade X E8 at SMA Negeri 1 Muaro Jambi, hereafter referred to as an Indonesian public senior high school. The original study focused on one IRE teacher and 34 students and sought to understand student learning motivation, teacher strategy, and contextual supports and barriers. Rather than presenting the preliminary observation as proof of intervention effectiveness, this manuscript reconstructs the available evidence as an exploratory qualitative case analysis. It asks: how is student motivation represented in the documented observation record; what teacher practices are reported; and how can the relationship between those practices and uneven participation be interpreted through motivational theory? The study's contribution is the Motivational Alignment Cycle, an evidence-bounded interpretive framework that links value framing, participation architecture, relational reinforcement, and responsive observation. The framework is intended to clarify why method variation alone may not be sufficient unless students also perceive relevance, psychological safety, and attainable opportunities to contribute. It thereby positions motivational participation as an equity-relevant condition of meaningful learning in IRE and comparable value-oriented subjects.

METHODS

Research Design and Study Context

The study was designed as a qualitative descriptive single-case study. A case-study approach is suitable when a bounded educational setting is examined in its natural context and the purpose is to interpret processes, conditions, and meanings rather than estimate population parameters [27], [28]. The case comprised IRE learning in Grade X E8 at an Indonesian public senior high school in Muaro Jambi, Jambi Province. The study context reported in the original proposal identified 34 students and an IRE teacher as the focal classroom actors.

Participants and Evidence Sources

The source proposal planned purposive engagement with the IRE teacher as the principal informant, students as contextual informants, and school documents such as teaching modules and lesson materials. The manuscript is deliberately narrower than the proposed full study: it analyzes only the preliminary observation evidence explicitly documented in the proposal. That record reports teacher practices and student participation patterns but does not provide interview transcripts, verbatim quotations, completed survey scores, observation counts, or documentary excerpts. Accordingly, the unit of analysis is the documented observation statement rather than individual students or individual lesson episodes.

Table 1. Study Context, Evidence Sources, and Evidence Boundaries

Element	Available Evidence	Boundary for This Manuscript
Setting	Indonesian public senior high school in Muaro Jambi, Jambi Province.	Single contextual case; no statistical generalization.
Class focus	Grade X E8; 34 students.	No individual demographic, achievement, or survey data reported.
Primary pedagogical actor	One IRE teacher.	No teacher interview transcript or lesson-plan artifact available.
Documented preliminary observation	Aperception, learning goals, motivational prompts, everyday-life links, lectures, discussion, question-and-answer, and concrete examples.	Presence of practice does not prove effectiveness.
Student motivation evidence	Heterogeneous participation: some attentive and active; others less focused, passive, or reluctant to respond.	No prevalence counts, longitudinal trend, or causal effect available.

Analytic Procedure and Trustworthiness

The preliminary observation record was examined using an evidence-bounded thematic analysis. The analysis followed the logic of familiarization, coding, theme construction, review, definition, and narrative reporting [29], [30], [31]. Codes were developed only for claims explicitly present in the proposal: motivational heterogeneity, initial framing, relevance connection, instructional variation, participation opportunities, and uneven response. The analysis was strengthened through an audit-oriented boundary statement that distinguishes observed conditions from inferred interpretations, consistent with qualitative quality criteria concerning credibility, transparency, and rich contextual description [32], [33]. In line with information-power reasoning, the evidentiary value of this analysis lies in its narrow, theory-informed, and context-specific purpose rather than sample size [34].

Ethical Considerations

The manuscript uses de-identified contextual information drawn from the source proposal. No names, interview quotations, audio recordings, or personal identifiers are reported. The article does not claim that a full ethics-reviewed field study has been completed. Any future expansion using interviews, classroom recordings, surveys, or student records should secure institutional approval, obtain informed consent and assent where relevant, and protect confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Motivation Profile in the Observed Class

The preliminary observation record portrays motivation as heterogeneous rather than uniformly low. Some students were described as attentive to the teacher, active in classroom activity, and willing to participate. At the same time, other students were reported to be less focused, passive during question-and-answer exchanges, and minimally involved in learning activity. The most specific participation concern was uneven response when the teacher posed questions: not all students contributed, suggesting differences in confidence, readiness, perceived relevance, or classroom safety. Because no numerical observation matrix was available, the results do not quantify the proportion of students in each profile.

Table 2. Qualitative Motivation Profile Identified in the Preliminary Observation

Observed Pattern	Illustrative Evidence in the Source Record	Interpretive Significance
Active engagement	Some students paid attention, participated, and followed classroom activities.	Indicates that IRE was not uniformly disengaging and that participation conditions were available to at least some learners.
Attention fragility	Some students were less focused during learning.	Signals a need to strengthen task relevance, structure, pacing, and opportunities for active processing.
Uneven verbal participation	Responses to teacher questions were not evenly distributed.	May reflect unequal confidence, perceived competence, willingness to take social risk, or differential access to speaking turns.
Passive participation	Several students were minimally involved in question-and-answer activity.	Requires responsive support rather than an assumption of low motivation as a fixed learner trait.

Motivational Framing Through Goals and Everyday Relevance

The teacher's practices began before formal content delivery. The source record notes aperception, explanation of learning objectives, and motivational prompts at the beginning of lessons. The teacher also connected IRE content to students' everyday lives. These practices are significant because they do not merely deliver information; they frame why the topic matters, establish a direction for participation, and position learning as relevant beyond assessment. The available evidence supports the presence of value framing, although it cannot determine how consistently it was enacted across lessons or how individual students interpreted it.

Participatory Instructional Repertoire

The teacher used a repertoire that included lecture, discussion, question-and-answer, and concrete examples connected to student experience. This indicates an effort to avoid a wholly one-directional lesson. Discussion and question-and-answer created opportunities for student voice, whereas concrete examples potentially made abstract IRE concepts more accessible. However, the observation also shows that participation opportunities did not automatically result in evenly distributed participation. The central result is therefore not that method variation 'solved' motivation, but that varied methods created participation openings whose uptake remained uneven.

Table 3. Teacher Practices Identified in the Source Record and Their Motivational Functions

Teacher Practice	Documented Form	Potential Motivational Function	Evidence Boundary
Aperception	Opening connection to prior learning or experience.	Activates prior knowledge and prepares students to see continuity between experience and new content.	No record of specific prompts or learner responses.
Learning-goal communication	Teacher explained learning objectives.	Clarifies direction and may support perceived task value and attainability.	No measure of goal understanding.
Motivational prompts	Teacher provided encouragement before learning.	Signals care, expectancy, and willingness to invest effort.	No evidence of intensity or individual impact.
Everyday-life examples	IRE content was linked to students' daily lives.	Builds relevance and practical meaning.	No comparison with non-contextual teaching.
Discussion and question-and-answer	Students were given opportunities to ask and express views.	Creates voice, interaction, and observable participation.	Participation was uneven.

Teacher Practice	Documented Form	Potential Motivational Function	Evidence Boundary
Lecture and concrete examples	Teacher explained material and used examples from real experiences.	Provides structure and interpretive scaffolding.	No direct evidence of conceptual change.

Supportive Conditions and Persistent Barriers

Two conditions appear simultaneously in the record. The supportive condition is a teacher who attempts to prepare students, vary instructional formats, connect content with lived experience, and invite contributions. The barrier is the persistence of uneven engagement, especially limited focus and reluctance to answer questions. This coexistence matters: motivation should not be interpreted as the product of a single method, nor should passive participation be attributed only to student disposition. The case suggests a need for teacher responses that distinguish between a lack of opportunity, a lack of clarity, a lack of perceived relevance, and a lack of confidence to participate.

Table 4. Supportive Conditions, Persistent Barriers, and Actionable Responses

Condition or Barrier	Implication for IRE Learning	Actionable Response for Future Practice
Clear initial framing	Students can be oriented to what the lesson is for and why it matters.	Use concise learning goals plus a short relevance question connected to a genuine adolescent concern.
Everyday-life relevance	Abstract values can be translated into recognizable choices and relationships.	Use cases, dilemmas, or scenarios that require students to justify a value-informed response.
Uneven response to questions	Open questioning may privilege already confident students.	Combine wait time, think-pair-share, anonymous response options, and structured turn-taking.
Passive or unfocused participation	Students may need clearer success criteria and lower-risk entry points.	Segment tasks, provide worked examples, and offer formative acknowledgment for effort and reasoning.
Need for ongoing observation	Teacher strategy requires adaptation, not one-time selection.	Use brief lesson-exit reflections and observation notes to identify who participates, who hesitates, and why.

Discussion

Interpreting the Findings Through Motivational Theory

The pattern of heterogeneous participation is consistent with evidence showing that engagement is shaped by classroom conditions and teacher-student interaction, not simply by a learner's stable level of interest [35]. In the present case, the teacher's use of encouragement, clear objectives, and everyday-life examples can be interpreted as attempts to provide task value, structure, and relational support. Such practices are aligned with research showing that teachers' motivational role becomes more effective when instruction communicates both care and an attainable pathway to participation [36]. At the same time, the uneven response pattern reinforces the distinction between providing an opportunity and ensuring that all students can use it.

The results also reinforce the value of combining autonomy support with instructional structure. A lesson that invites students to speak but does not clarify the task, provide adequate preparation time, or protect against social risk may leave less confident students silent. Reeve and Cheon argue that autonomy-supportive teaching is a learnable professional practice rather than a fixed teacher disposition [37]. For IRE, this means that pedagogical encouragement should not be restricted to exhortation; it should include concrete participation designs such as structured peer discussion, usable examples, explicit criteria, and formative feedback.

The findings are congruent with IRE research that identifies contextualization, reinforcement, varied methods, and personal attention as motivation-related practices [19], [20], [38], [39]. However, the present analysis contributes a more integrated interpretation: the strategies work through an alignment of meaning, opportunity, relationship, and adaptive response. This matters particularly in value-oriented subjects where students may acknowledge the importance of religious learning yet still hesitate to take part in public classroom exchanges. The case suggests that relevance without participation architecture may remain passive appreciation, and participation architecture without relational reinforcement may privilege students who are already confident.

The broader educational literature supports this emphasis on classroom climate and social interaction. Students' perceptions of classroom climate are related to academic achievement [40], and teacher-student relationships show longitudinal associations with engagement [41]. Brief interventions can also help students reframe academic experiences, particularly the interpretation of difficulty and opportunities for improvement [42]. In the present IRE case, these insights point to a practical priority: design classroom routines that normalize tentative answers, make improvement visible, and provide multiple legitimate ways to participate.

The proposed novelty is the Motivational Alignment Cycle. The cycle begins with value framing, in which the teacher activates prior knowledge, names the learning goal, and makes relevance visible. It then moves to participation architecture, in which students receive structured, low-risk, and meaningful opportunities to contribute. Relational reinforcement follows through non-controlling encouragement, recognition of effort, and respectful response to partial answers. Finally, responsive observation allows the teacher to notice uneven participation and adjust the next cycle. This is not a causal model or a validated scale; it is a theory-informed interpretive framework derived from the specific practice pattern documented in the case.

The framework has implications for practice and institutional support. At teacher level, professional development should move beyond increasing the number of methods used and instead strengthen teachers' ability to diagnose why participation is uneven. At school level, leaders can support peer observation, short reflective lesson reviews, and access to counseling or student-support services for learners whose disengagement is connected to broader psychosocial concerns. At policy level, IRE should be positioned as part of inclusive education and student well-being: meaningful participation in value-oriented learning is an educational opportunity that should not be limited to the most verbally confident students. Such implications remain sensitive to implementation conditions, since motivational interventions can show different effects across learners and settings [43].

CONCLUSION

The preliminary evidence from Grade X E8 at an Indonesian public senior high school shows that IRE learning motivation is heterogeneous: participatory engagement coexists with limited focus, passive response, and uneven willingness to speak. The teacher's documented practices - aperception, goal communication, motivational prompts, everyday-life relevance, varied methods, discussion, question-and-answer, and concrete examples - create a promising foundation but do not by themselves guarantee equitable participation. The article's contribution is the Motivational Alignment Cycle, which frames teacher strategy as the alignment of value framing, participation architecture, relational reinforcement, and responsive observation. The framework directs future research toward richer, triangulated evidence and directs practice toward low-risk, meaningful participation opportunities for all students.

LIMITATIONS

This manuscript has four important limitations. First, it analyzes preliminary observation statements contained in a proposal rather than a completed field dataset. Second, the evidence contains no interviews, direct quotations, lesson transcripts, student survey scores, achievement data, or longitudinal follow-up. Third, the analysis cannot establish causal effects, relative effectiveness of strategies, or prevalence of the observed patterns. Fourth, the case is intentionally bounded to one class and one school context. These limitations are not deficits to be concealed; they define the appropriate scope of the contribution. A subsequent full study should triangulate observations, interviews, student reflections, lesson artifacts, and, where appropriate, validated motivation measures.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

F.N. conceptualized the study; designed the qualitative case-study approach; conducted the evidence-bounded thematic analysis of the preliminary observation record; developed the Motivational Alignment Cycle; and prepared the original manuscript draft. I.F. contributed to the refinement of the research design and theoretical framework, supported the interpretation of the findings, and critically revised the manuscript. M.T. contributed to the conceptual refinement, reviewed the analytical interpretation, and edited the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and accept responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT solely to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, and improving the clarity of selected passages during manuscript preparation. The tool was not used to generate, collect, analyze, or interpret the study data; formulate the study findings; or make research decisions. All AI-assisted text was critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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