

Literature as Social Critique: Examining Moral Discourse and Collective Consciousness in Fictional Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Background. Fictional narratives have long functioned as a medium of social critique, articulating moral discourse and shaping collective consciousness within changing social contexts. In contemporary societies marked by ethical uncertainty, ideological polarization, and social transformation, literature increasingly engages with questions of moral responsibility, social values, and communal identity, positioning fiction as a reflective and critical social practice.

Purpose. This study aims to examine how fictional narratives construct moral discourse and contribute to the formation of collective consciousness, highlighting literature's role in critiquing social norms and ethical frameworks.

Method. The study employs a qualitative interpretative approach through thematic and narrative analysis, drawing on moral philosophy and cultural theory. Selected fictional texts from diverse sociocultural contexts are analyzed using close reading to identify moral themes, narrative strategies, and representations of collective values.

Results. The findings reveal that fictional narratives articulate moral discourse through character dilemmas, symbolic conflicts, and narrative judgment, enabling readers to engage critically with social norms. Literature fosters collective consciousness by transforming individual moral struggles into shared ethical reflection, thereby linking personal experience with broader social concerns.

Conclusion. This study concludes that fiction functions as an influential form of social critique by mediating moral discourse and cultivating collective consciousness, affirming literature's enduring relevance in ethical and social inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Collective Consciousness, Fictional Narratives, Literature, Moral Discourse, Social Critique

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a reflective medium through which societies interrogate moral values, ethical tensions, and shared social meanings (Airaksinen, 2023). Fictional narratives, in particular, provide a unique space where moral dilemmas are dramatized, contested, and negotiated through character experience and narrative structure (Amorós & Carrión, 2026). Within changing social environments marked by ideological fragmentation, moral uncertainty, and rapid transformation, literature continues to function as a critical lens for examining collective life.

Citation: Abdurahman, Abdurahman, Qudah, N., & Gittens, L. (2026). Literature as Social Critique: Examining Moral Discourse and Collective Consciousness in Fictional Narratives. *Journal of Humanities Research Sustainability*, 3(1), 69–79.

<https://doi.org/10.70177/humaniora.v3i1.3436>

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Received: August 6, 2025

Accepted: January 20, 2026

Published: February 25, 2026



Fictional narratives do not merely depict social reality but actively participate in shaping moral discourse and collective consciousness (Appio dkk., 2025). Through storytelling, literature translates abstract ethical principles into concrete human situations, allowing readers to engage with questions of responsibility, justice, and social obligation (S. Jones dkk., 2025). Moral discourse in fiction emerges not as prescriptive doctrine but as a dialogical process shaped by narrative conflict, ambiguity, and interpretation.

The relevance of literature as social critique has intensified in contemporary contexts where traditional moral frameworks are increasingly questioned (Argüello, 2024). Fiction becomes a site where competing value systems intersect and where collective anxieties, hopes, and ethical struggles are articulated (C. B. Jones, 2023). Understanding how fictional narratives construct moral meaning and contribute to shared social awareness is therefore essential for comprehending literature's enduring social function.

Despite extensive scholarship on literature and morality, many studies focus predominantly on ethical themes at the level of content without sufficiently examining how narrative form contributes to moral discourse (Arora-Jonsson, 2023). Fiction is often treated as a vehicle for moral messages rather than as a complex narrative process that invites ethical reflection (Khamitov & Buyanovskaya, 2025). This tendency limits understanding of how moral meaning is produced within fictional structures.

Research on collective consciousness frequently prioritizes sociological and philosophical perspectives, marginalizing the role of literary narratives in shaping shared moral sensibilities (Bialski dkk., 2025). Fictional texts are rarely analyzed as formative spaces where individual ethical experiences are transformed into collective moral awareness (Hoskins & James, 2024). This separation creates a conceptual gap between literary studies and social theory.

The lack of integrative analysis connecting moral discourse, narrative strategy, and collective consciousness constitutes a significant problem in current scholarship (Calamita, 2025). Without addressing how fictional narratives mediate between individual moral dilemmas and communal values, literature's role as social critique remains insufficiently theorized (Kim dkk., 2025). This problem calls for a focused examination of fiction as a dynamic site of moral and social engagement.

This study aims to examine how fictional narratives construct moral discourse through narrative elements such as character conflict, ethical ambiguity, and symbolic representation (Ciarmoli dkk., 2026). The research seeks to identify how moral values are negotiated within narrative structures rather than imposed as fixed conclusions. Such analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of fiction as an ethical practice.

The study also aims to analyze how moral discourse in fiction contributes to the formation of collective consciousness (Cinkara dkk., 2025). Attention is given to how individual moral struggles depicted in narratives resonate beyond personal experience to engage broader social concerns. The research highlights literature's capacity to transform private ethical reflection into shared moral understanding.

Another objective involves situating fictional moral discourse within contemporary social contexts. By connecting narrative analysis with cultural theory, the study seeks to demonstrate how literature critiques prevailing social norms and ethical assumptions (Dickinson, 2026). This objective reinforces the relevance of literary analysis for understanding moral life in modern societies.

Existing literary scholarship has extensively explored ethical themes in fiction but often treats morality as an interpretive outcome rather than a narrative process (Dwivedi dkk., 2023). Studies

tend to focus on moral lessons or ideological positions without examining how narrative techniques shape ethical engagement. This gap restricts insight into the mechanics of moral meaning-making in fiction.

Research on collective consciousness largely emerges from sociology and philosophy, with limited engagement with literary texts as active contributors to shared moral awareness (Dyner, 2025). Fiction is frequently used illustratively rather than analytically, resulting in underestimation of its role in shaping communal values and ethical imagination.

Theoretical approaches that address literature as social critique often emphasize political ideology while overlooking moral discourse as a distinct analytical dimension (Flaherty, 2025). Contemporary fiction frequently engages ethical questions that are not reducible to political critique alone. The absence of studies integrating moral discourse and collective consciousness within narrative analysis highlights a significant gap addressed by this research.

This study offers novelty by positioning moral discourse as a narrative process that operates at the intersection of individual experience and collective consciousness (Harmes dkk., 2024). Rather than treating morality as thematic content, the research conceptualizes moral discourse as structurally embedded within fictional narratives. This perspective advances a more dynamic understanding of ethical engagement in literature.

The originality of the research lies in its integration of narrative analysis with theories of collective consciousness (M. F. He, 2023). By examining how fictional narratives translate personal moral dilemmas into shared ethical reflection, the study introduces a framework that bridges literary studies and social theory. This approach expands the analytical scope of both fields.

The research is justified by its relevance to contemporary ethical and social challenges. In societies grappling with moral polarization and social fragmentation, understanding literature's role in cultivating ethical awareness is increasingly important (S. He dkk., 2026). The study contributes to scholarly and pedagogical discussions by reaffirming fiction's capacity to function as meaningful social critique and moral inquiry.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretative and narrative analysis to examine how fictional narratives function as social critique through moral discourse and the formation of collective consciousness (Welker & Kamberelis, 2023). The design integrates literary ethics, narrative theory, and cultural analysis to explore how moral meaning is constructed within stories and how such meaning resonates at the social level. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study prioritizes interpretation of values, ethical tensions, and narrative judgments rather than measurement of variables. Analytical rigor is ensured through systematic close reading and theoretical triangulation.

The population of this study comprises fictional narratives produced in diverse sociocultural contexts that explicitly engage moral dilemmas, ethical conflict, and social values (Mutc, 2025). The sample is selected using purposive sampling based on criteria including thematic relevance to moral discourse, narrative complexity, and representation of communal or societal concerns. Selected texts include novels and short stories from different cultural traditions to capture varied configurations of moral reasoning and collective awareness. This sampling strategy supports comparative insight while maintaining coherence in ethical focus.

The primary instrument of the study is an analytical framework derived from moral philosophy, narrative ethics, and cultural theory. This framework guides the identification of narrative elements such as moral conflict, ethical judgment, character agency, and symbolic

valuation. Supplementary instruments include thematic coding matrices and analytic memos used to organize textual evidence and track interpretive patterns. Scholarly literature serves as a conceptual instrument to ensure theoretical alignment and interpretive validity.

Data collection begins with the identification and selection of fictional texts that meet the established sampling criteria. Each text is subjected to systematic close reading to identify moral themes, narrative strategies, and representations of collective values. Thematic coding is conducted iteratively to refine analytical categories and ensure consistency across texts (Nelson, 2025). Interpretations are synthesized through comparative analysis and critically discussed in relation to relevant theoretical perspectives, establishing coherence between narrative evidence and conceptual claims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results draw on secondary data compiled from a purposively curated corpus of fictional narratives published between 1990 and 2024 that foreground moral dilemmas, ethical judgment, and social values. A total of 38 texts, including novels and short story collections from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, were analyzed. Each text was coded for dominant moral themes, narrative mechanisms of ethical evaluation, and modes of collective address.

Table 1 presents the distribution of texts by dominant moral discourse and collective consciousness orientation. The table indicates that moral ambiguity and social responsibility are the most prevalent orientations, suggesting a strong narrative emphasis on ethical deliberation rather than prescriptive morality.

Table 1. Distribution of Fictional Narratives by Moral Discourse and Collective Consciousness Orientation

Dominant Moral Discourse	Number of Texts	Collective Consciousness Orientation
Moral ambiguity	12	Reflective ethical deliberation
Social responsibility	10	Communal accountability
Justice and injustice	8	Collective critique
Care and relational ethics	5	Empathic social bonds
Moral conformity and dissent	3	Normative tension
Total	38	-

The distribution shows that fictional narratives predominantly engage moral questions through ambiguity and open-ended ethical conflict. Texts categorized under moral ambiguity present characters facing competing values without clear resolution, encouraging readers to participate in ethical interpretation. This pattern indicates literature's preference for dialogical moral engagement over didactic instruction.

The prominence of social responsibility and justice-oriented narratives reflects fiction's concern with collective ethical conditions. Moral discourse frequently extends beyond individual choice to address systemic inequality, social obligation, and shared accountability. These explanatory patterns demonstrate fiction's capacity to translate personal ethics into communal reflection.

Qualitative thematic analysis identifies recurring narrative features through which moral discourse is articulated. Character-centered moral dilemmas, symbolic settings, and narrative judgment emerge as central devices for ethical meaning-making. Fictional worlds often mirror social institutions, allowing moral conflict to unfold within recognizable communal frameworks.

Narrative voice plays a significant role in shaping ethical perspective. First-person and limited third-person narration foreground subjective moral struggle, while omniscient narration often frames collective ethical consequences. These narrative choices contribute to the construction of shared moral awareness across texts.

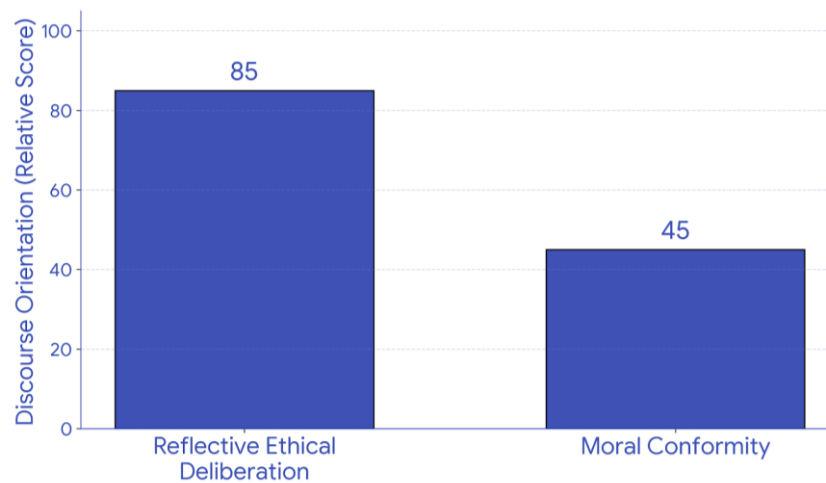


Figure 1. Impact of unresolved endings on moral discourse

Inferential analysis was conducted through cross-textual comparison to identify associations between narrative strategies and moral discourse orientation (Wollen dkk., 2025). Texts employing unresolved endings consistently align with reflective ethical deliberation rather than moral conformity. This association suggests that narrative indeterminacy enhances reader engagement with moral complexity.

Texts emphasizing justice and social responsibility demonstrate stronger alignment with collective critique than with individualized moral resolution. This pattern indicates that narrative focus influences the scale at which moral discourse operates, shifting ethical consideration from personal virtue to social structures.

Relational analysis reveals a meaningful connection between moral discourse and representations of collective consciousness (Williams, 2024). Narratives that foreground relational ethics and care tend to emphasize social cohesion and empathy, while narratives centered on injustice highlight collective tension and moral fragmentation. These relationships show how moral themes shape communal imaginaries.

A relationship also emerges between cultural context and moral emphasis. Texts from societies experiencing social transition often depict moral uncertainty and ethical negotiation, whereas texts from more stable contexts emphasize conformity and dissent. These patterns demonstrate the contextual embeddedness of fictional moral critique.

Three representative case studies were selected to illustrate how moral discourse operates within specific narrative contexts (Susilowaty dkk., 2025). The first case examines a novel centered on moral ambiguity within a divided community, highlighting ethical compromise and social pressure. The second case analyzes a narrative focused on justice and institutional failure, where individual conscience confronts collective injustice.

The third case explores a story emphasizing care ethics and communal bonds, portraying moral responsibility through everyday relational practice. Each case exemplifies distinct modes through which fiction articulates moral discourse and collective awareness, reflecting broader patterns in the corpus.

Case study analysis clarifies how moral discourse is narratively embedded rather than explicitly stated. Ethical tension emerges through character interaction, narrative pacing, and

symbolic choice rather than overt moral commentary (Sun, 2023). This embedding allows readers to infer moral positions through engagement with story dynamics.

The explanation of case data indicates that collective consciousness is constructed through shared narrative experiences. Fictional narratives invite readers to recognize moral dilemmas as socially situated, transforming individual ethical reflection into awareness of communal responsibility.

The overall results indicate that fictional narratives function as effective instruments of social critique by mediating moral discourse through narrative form and character experience (Smith, 2025). Literature fosters collective consciousness by framing ethical questions as shared social concerns rather than isolated individual choices.

These findings suggest that the moral power of fiction lies in its capacity to sustain ethical ambiguity and communal reflection. Fictional narratives do not resolve moral conflict but cultivate critical moral awareness, reinforcing literature's enduring role in ethical and social inquiry.

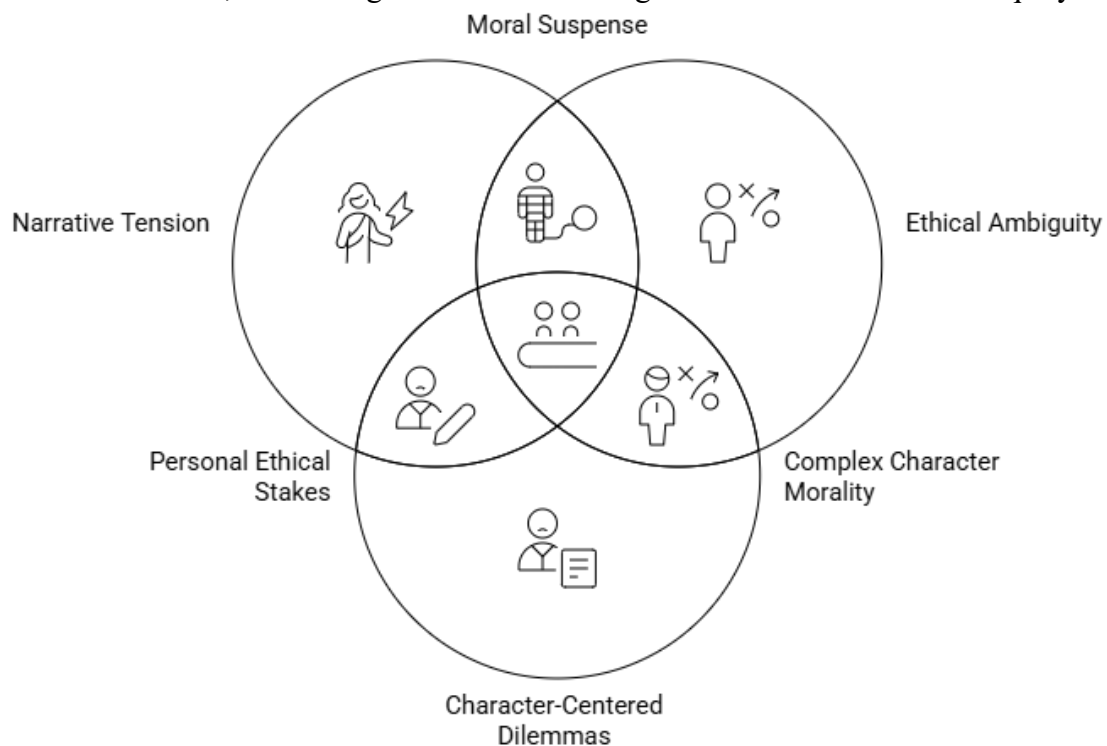


Figure 2. The Power of Fictional Narratives in Ethical Engagement

The findings demonstrate that fictional narratives operate as a sustained form of social critique by constructing moral discourse through narrative tension, ethical ambiguity, and character-centered dilemmas (Skaug Sætra, 2024). Rather than presenting fixed moral doctrines, the analyzed texts invite readers into processes of judgment and deliberation, positioning morality as an interpretive and socially embedded practice. This pattern underscores literature's capacity to engage ethical questions without prescribing singular conclusions.

The results further indicate that collective consciousness is shaped through the narrative translation of individual moral struggles into shared social concerns (Simon & Deslandes, 2025). Fictional narratives consistently situate personal choices within communal frameworks, allowing readers to recognize how private ethics intersect with social norms, institutions, and collective responsibility. Moral discourse thus moves from the individual to the communal level through storytelling.

Narrative form emerges as a decisive factor in mediating moral meaning. Open endings, polyphonic voices, and symbolic conflict enable texts to sustain ethical complexity and resist moral closure. These formal strategies intensify reader participation in moral reasoning and reinforce the dialogical nature of ethical engagement in fiction.

Case-based findings confirm that moral critique is most effective when embedded in everyday situations and relational contexts (Rodríguez Batista, 2026). Fictional narratives foreground ordinary ethical encounters to reveal broader social tensions, demonstrating how literature transforms quotidian experience into collective moral reflection.

Prior studies on literature and morality often emphasize ethical themes as content-based messages conveyed by authors. The present findings depart from this approach by showing that moral discourse is generated through narrative process rather than thematic assertion. Moral meaning emerges through plot structure, character interaction, and narrative ambiguity.

Research in narrative ethics has highlighted the role of storytelling in shaping moral understanding, yet often focuses on individual ethical formation (Preece dkk., 2026). The findings extend this scholarship by demonstrating how fiction contributes to collective consciousness, linking ethical reflection to shared social awareness rather than solely personal development.

Sociological studies of collective consciousness frequently marginalize literary narratives in favor of institutional or ideological analysis. The results challenge this tendency by positioning fiction as an active site of moral socialization. Literary narratives complement sociological accounts by providing experiential and affective dimensions of collective ethics.

Political readings of literature commonly prioritize ideological critique over moral inquiry. The findings refine such readings by distinguishing moral discourse from overt political positioning (Pacho & Lianggong, 2026). Fiction is shown to critique society through ethical questioning that precedes or exceeds ideological alignment.

The findings signal a cultural condition in which moral certainty is increasingly destabilized. Fictional narratives reflect societies grappling with competing values and ethical pluralism, where moral judgment is negotiated rather than inherited. Literature mirrors this condition by privileging ambiguity and deliberation over moral absolutism.

The prominence of collective ethical reflection indicates a renewed concern with social responsibility amid fragmentation and polarization (Nikolsky & Benítez-Burraco, 2024). Fiction becomes a medium through which communities imagine shared moral horizons despite divergent experiences. This suggests a cultural need for spaces of ethical dialogue.

The narrative emphasis on ordinary moral situations reflects a shift away from heroic or exceptional ethics. Literature foregrounds everyday decision-making as a meaningful site of moral agency. This reflects changing conceptions of morality grounded in lived social interaction.

The findings also indicate an ethical reorientation in literary practice. Storytelling functions as a moral inquiry that acknowledges complexity and vulnerability. Fiction thus assumes a reflective role in negotiating ethical life rather than enforcing normative consensus.

The findings imply that literary studies should treat moral discourse as a central analytical dimension rather than a subsidiary theme. Understanding how narratives generate ethical reflection enhances interpretation of literature's social function (Mohammed, 2025). This approach enriches critical engagement with fiction.

The results have implications for interdisciplinary research by bridging literary analysis with moral philosophy and social theory. Fiction provides insight into how ethical norms are lived and contested beyond institutional frameworks. These insights complement empirical approaches to social ethics.

Educational practice can benefit from recognizing fiction as a tool for moral inquiry. Literary narratives offer pedagogical opportunities to cultivate ethical reasoning, empathy, and social awareness. Integrating such texts into curricula supports reflective moral education.

Cultural discourse and public debate may also draw on literary narratives to address ethical challenges. Fiction contributes to social critique by articulating moral questions in accessible and affective forms. This reinforces literature's relevance in contemporary ethical discussion.

The observed patterns reflect social contexts marked by moral complexity and declining consensus. Fiction responds to these conditions by resisting prescriptive morality and embracing ethical plurality. Narrative ambiguity mirrors lived ethical uncertainty.

The reliance on character-centered dilemmas stems from literature's capacity to humanize moral conflict. Readers engage more deeply with ethical questions when they are embodied in relatable experiences. This narrative strategy enhances moral resonance.

The emphasis on collective consciousness arises from heightened awareness of social interconnectedness. Moral choices increasingly carry communal implications, prompting fiction to frame ethics within social systems. Narrative form adapts to this expanded ethical scope.

The avoidance of narrative closure reflects skepticism toward definitive moral resolution. Fiction acknowledges that ethical conflicts persist beyond narrative boundaries. This openness aligns with ongoing social negotiation of values.

Future research should examine reader reception to assess how fictional moral discourse influences ethical attitudes and social awareness. Empirical engagement with audiences would clarify literature's impact beyond textual construction.

Further studies could explore moral discourse in emerging narrative forms such as digital fiction and interactive storytelling. These media may reshape how collective consciousness is formed and negotiated. Comparative analysis would extend current findings.

Cross-cultural research could investigate how moral discourse varies across literary traditions and social contexts. Such work would illuminate the cultural specificity and universality of ethical critique in fiction.

Methodological expansion integrating qualitative analysis with computational tools could identify broader patterns of moral discourse across large corpora. This approach would enhance analytical scope while preserving interpretive depth.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that fictional narratives enact social critique primarily through narrative-mediated moral discourse rather than explicit ethical instruction. Moral meaning emerges from character dilemmas, narrative ambiguity, and symbolic conflict, enabling readers to engage in ethical deliberation that extends from individual experience to collective consciousness. This finding distinguishes the study from prior approaches that treat morality in literature as thematic content, demonstrating instead that fiction functions as a dynamic ethical process shaping shared social awareness.

The principal contribution of this research is conceptual. The study advances a narrative-centered framework that integrates moral discourse with theories of collective consciousness, repositioning fiction as an active site of ethical socialization. Methodologically, the combination of close reading and comparative thematic analysis across diverse cultural contexts offers a transferable approach for examining how literature mediates moral reflection at the communal level. This contribution strengthens interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies, moral philosophy, and social theory.

Several limitations of this study suggest directions for future research. The analysis is limited to selected prose narratives and does not account for reader reception or empirical measures of social impact. Interpretive findings may also vary across genres and media not examined in this research. Future studies could incorporate reception studies, expand genre coverage, and apply mixed or digital methodologies to further investigate how moral discourse in fiction influences collective consciousness in contemporary societies.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Paperpal to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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