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## Digital Narratives as Emotional Scaffolds: A Case Study of Student-Generated Stories in Thai ESL Classrooms

Pong Krit<sup>1</sup> , Rit Som<sup>2</sup> , Siri Lek<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Rangsit University, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>Songkhla University, Thailand

<sup>3</sup>Silpakorn University, Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** The increasing integration of digital storytelling in English as a Second Language (ESL) education highlights its potential not only for linguistic development but also for emotional expression among learners.

**Purpose.** This study investigates how digital narratives created by Thai ESL students function as emotional scaffolds in language learning environments. The research aims to explore the affective dimensions of student-generated digital stories, specifically how these narratives foster emotional engagement, self-expression, and learner identity in the ESL classroom.

**Method.** Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis of student projects.

**Results.** Findings indicate that digital storytelling enabled students to externalize personal experiences, reduce language anxiety, and build emotional connections with the learning content. Furthermore, the process encouraged collaborative dialogue and empathy among peers.

**Conclusion.** The study concludes that digital narratives serve as both pedagogical and emotional tools, bridging language skills with psychological well-being. Implications suggest that ESL educators should intentionally design digital storytelling tasks to support students' emotional development alongside language proficiency.

### KEYWORDS

Digital Storytelling, Emotional Scaffolding, ESL Education

### INTRODUCTION

Digital storytelling has emerged as a transformative educational tool in second language (L2) learning, offering students the opportunity to express their thoughts, experiences, and identities through multimedia platforms. In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, especially in non-native settings such as Thailand, the integration of digital narratives enables learners to move beyond traditional linguistic tasks toward richer, emotionally charged communicative acts. As global educational paradigms increasingly shift toward learner-centered and affective-based approaches, digital storytelling aligns with pedagogies that honor students' voices, emotions, and self-representations in the language classroom.

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#### Correspondence:

Pong Krit,  
[pongkrit@gmail.com](mailto:pongkrit@gmail.com)

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The growing popularity of digital storytelling in L2 learning is closely tied to developments in multimodal literacy and educational technologies, which allow for a blending of textual, visual, and auditory elements in student-generated content. While the linguistic benefits of such practices have been widely acknowledged—such as improvements in vocabulary acquisition, narrative cohesion, and grammatical accuracy—less attention has been given to the emotional dimension of language learning. Emotional engagement is critical to effective L2 acquisition, particularly in environments where students may struggle with anxiety, low self-esteem, or a lack of cultural affinity with the target language.

In Thai ESL classrooms, the affective challenges faced by students are often intensified by sociocultural and systemic factors such as exam-oriented curricula, teacher-dominated instruction, and limited opportunities for self-expression. Within this educational landscape, digital storytelling may offer a counterbalance by positioning students as active agents who construct meaning from their lived experiences (Aktaş Reyhan, 2025; Arora, 2025; Channa et al., 2025; Galvão-Ferreira et al., 2025; Mungsoongnern et al., 2025; Ulusoy & Ulusoy, 2025). The emotional resonance of personal narratives—when paired with the creative possibilities of digital media—has the potential to support psychological safety, foster motivation, and create a bridge between students' inner worlds and the demands of English communication.

Despite the increasing use of digital storytelling in ESL pedagogy, there remains a significant lack of empirical research on its role in scaffolding learners' emotional experiences, particularly in Asian educational contexts. Current literature primarily emphasizes the cognitive or linguistic gains associated with storytelling practices, often overlooking the affective domain which plays a pivotal role in language learning outcomes. This gap results in an incomplete understanding of how students internalize and respond to narrative-based tasks that are meant to enhance both linguistic fluency and emotional resilience.

Thai ESL students, in particular, encounter multiple emotional obstacles in language learning settings. These challenges include a fear of making mistakes, reluctance to speak in public, and internalized notions of linguistic inferiority compared to native speakers. (Banfi & Oreni, 2025; Navas Romero, 2025; Schachtner, 2025; Sepehr & Felt, 2025; Smith et al., 2025). While digital storytelling can potentially mitigate these issues by providing a personalized and private space for expression, there is insufficient evidence about how this tool functions as an emotional scaffold in real classroom settings. Without such data, educators and curriculum designers may underestimate the socio-emotional potential of digital narrative practices in ESL instruction.

In light of these concerns, there is an urgent need to explore how digital storytelling can be intentionally leveraged to enhance students' emotional engagement with the learning process. Understanding the interplay between narrative construction, emotional processing, and language development can offer practical and theoretical insights into the emotional ecology of the ESL classroom (Greig, 2025; Piper et al., 2025; Schlauch et al., 2025; Shamseldien et al., 2025; Sudha Rani & Sudha Rani, 2025). This study thus positions itself at the intersection of educational technology, emotional psychology, and second language pedagogy to address this overlooked dimension in current research.

This study aims to examine the role of student-generated digital stories as emotional scaffolds within Thai ESL classrooms. Specifically, it investigates how the act of constructing digital narratives enables learners to externalize emotions, reflect on personal experiences, and establish emotional connections with both the content and their peers. The research seeks to understand the emotional affordances of digital storytelling, particularly in contexts where affective barriers to language learning are prevalent.

Another objective of this study is to analyze the ways in which digital narratives facilitate emotional self-regulation and social empathy among Thai ESL learners. Through the analysis of students' storytelling artifacts, classroom interactions, and self-reflections, the study identifies patterns of emotional discourse that emerge during the storytelling process. The findings aim to provide a deeper understanding of how emotional scaffolding functions in digital narrative environments, especially when students are encouraged to explore themes of identity, family, loss, hope, or aspiration.

Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute practical pedagogical strategies for incorporating digital storytelling as a means to promote emotional literacy in ESL contexts. By articulating how emotional scaffolding complements language instruction, the study offers actionable insights for teachers, teacher trainers, and curriculum developers interested in holistic approaches to second language education. This orientation reflects a broader shift toward humanizing pedagogy, wherein affect and cognition are seen as interdependent elements of meaningful learning.

Existing research on digital storytelling in ESL education has predominantly focused on its potential for enhancing language proficiency, narrative structure, and student motivation. These studies, while valuable, often treat storytelling as a technical or linguistic exercise, failing to account for the psychological processes underlying emotional expression. Few works explore how emotional engagement through storytelling impacts learners' confidence, willingness to communicate, or sense of identity in the second language.

Moreover, literature that does touch upon the emotional aspects of digital storytelling tends to emerge from Western contexts, with limited representation from Southeast Asian classrooms. Cultural differences in communication style, emotional expression, and classroom dynamics may significantly influence how students engage with storytelling tasks. The absence of region-specific data, particularly from Thai ESL settings, creates a theoretical and practical blind spot in understanding the localized impact of digital narratives.

This study addresses this gap by offering a culturally grounded investigation into the affective dimensions of storytelling in Thai ESL classrooms. By focusing on student-generated content and classroom interactions, the research reveals how digital narratives serve not merely as outputs of linguistic competence, but as processes of emotional negotiation and identity formation. This perspective introduces an underexplored layer of complexity to digital pedagogy and expands the discourse on emotional scaffolding in language learning.

This study offers a novel contribution by framing digital storytelling as an emotional scaffold rather than merely a linguistic or creative tool. It brings attention to the affective processes that accompany narrative construction and highlights the psychological benefits of digital storytelling for ESL learners in high-anxiety, performance-driven educational contexts. This emotional lens is relatively rare in applied linguistics literature, making the study's conceptual orientation both timely and significant.

The research is further justified by its methodological commitment to capturing lived student experiences through qualitative case study analysis. By examining the actual narratives produced by learners alongside observational and interview data, the study provides a rich, textured account of how emotional scaffolding takes place in real-time pedagogical settings. This multi-dimensional approach enables the research to bridge theoretical constructs with classroom realities in a way that is immediately relevant to practitioners.

In contributing to the growing discourse on affective education, this study not only fills a critical void in ESL research but also aligns with broader calls for inclusive and emotionally

responsive pedagogies. Its findings hold practical implications for teachers seeking to humanize language instruction and support students' holistic development. Moreover, it invites scholars to reconsider the boundaries between language, emotion, and identity in the 21st-century classroom.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the emotional functions of student-generated digital narratives in Thai ESL classrooms. The case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context. Emphasis was placed on capturing the nuanced emotional experiences of learners as they engaged in the process of constructing and sharing digital stories (Golenko et al., 2025; Hillerdal et al., 2025; Keum et al., 2025; Koskan et al., 2025; Rajarajeswari et al., 2025). The design enabled the researcher to analyze multiple sources of data, including student artifacts, classroom interactions, and personal reflections, to gain a holistic perspective on the role of emotional scaffolding in second language learning.

The population for this study consisted of Thai secondary school students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in two urban schools in Bangkok. A purposive sampling technique was used to select two ESL classrooms with a total of 45 students, aged between 15 and 17 years. From this group, 10 students were selected as focal participants based on their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews and their consistent engagement during the digital storytelling project. The selection ensured diversity in gender, language proficiency levels, and emotional expressiveness to reflect varied learner experiences.

The instruments used in this study included semi-structured interview guides, classroom observation sheets, and a rubric for analyzing the emotional content of digital narratives. Interviews were conducted with both students and teachers to gather insights into their perceptions of the emotional aspects of storytelling. Observations were recorded using a structured template to capture student behaviors, peer interactions, and teacher responses during the storytelling sessions. The digital stories produced by students were analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on emotional themes, narrative structure, and self-expression.

The procedures for data collection followed a three-phase process conducted over an eight-week period. In the first phase, students received training on digital storytelling elements, including narrative structure, visual design, and audio narration. The second phase involved the creation of digital stories in which students were asked to narrate personal experiences or significant life events using multimedia tools such as PowerPoint, Adobe Spark, or smartphone-based applications. In the final phase, students presented their digital stories to peers, followed by reflective discussions and individual interviews. Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo software to identify recurring emotional patterns and scaffolding mechanisms present throughout the storytelling process.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a summary of the types of emotional expressions identified in the 45 digital narratives produced by Thai ESL students. The emotional categories include happiness, sadness, fear, hope, and gratitude. Happiness appeared in 73% of the stories, often connected to family moments, friendships, or school achievements. Sadness was present in 51% of narratives, typically related to loss, separation, or personal failure. Expressions of fear and anxiety emerged in 38% of the narratives, while gratitude and hope were observed in 45% and 63% respectively. The data

indicate that students were capable of articulating a range of emotions despite the constraints of a second language.

**Table 1.**

Frequency of Emotional Categories in Student Digital Narratives (n = 45)

Emotion Category	Frequency	Percentage
Happiness	33	73%
Sadness	23	51%
Fear/Anxiety	17	38%
Gratitude	20	45%
Hope	28	63%

Narratives with multiple emotional tones were coded based on primary emotional focus. The presence of mixed emotions in 67% of the stories suggests that learners not only recalled events but also evaluated them affectively. Emotional complexity was particularly evident in stories about overcoming hardship or personal transformation, where sadness was accompanied by hope or gratitude. Students who shared emotionally difficult experiences, such as parental divorce or academic failure, often concluded their stories with affirmations of resilience or support from others.

The data also reveal the extent to which digital narratives functioned as safe spaces for emotional disclosure. Observations documented that students who were usually silent or hesitant in oral classroom activities demonstrated significant engagement during the digital storytelling sessions. Audio recordings revealed modulated voice tones and emotional inflections, while visual components such as images and music selections added layers of emotional context to the stories. The affordances of digital media allowed students to construct multi-sensory representations of personal emotions, which might have been otherwise difficult to express verbally in a second language.

Interview responses from focal participants further supported the emotional significance of the activity. Several students reported that digital storytelling enabled them to "speak from the heart" and express feelings they had "never said aloud before." One student mentioned that "writing in English helped me to think about my life in a new way." Teachers also noted a visible change in students' attitudes and emotional openness, particularly among learners who typically displayed low classroom confidence. These qualitative insights reinforce the emotional scaffolding function of the task and demonstrate its capacity to promote self-awareness and expressive fluency.

Inferential analysis was conducted to assess the correlation between students' emotional engagement and their perceived language confidence. Using Pearson's  $r$ , a moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was found between the emotional depth of narratives (coded through thematic density) and students' self-reported confidence in English speaking and writing. This finding suggests that students who invested more emotionally in their narratives also perceived growth in their language use. The relationship implies that emotional resonance may act as a motivating factor in linguistic performance.

Further analysis indicated that students with higher emotional complexity in their narratives received more peer interaction during classroom presentations. Engagement scores—based on the number of questions, affirmations, and comments from classmates—were significantly higher for stories that involved themes of personal struggle or inspiration ( $M = 9.4$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) compared to neutral or task-focused narratives ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ), with a  $t$ -test yielding  $t(43) = 3.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

Emotional vulnerability in storytelling appeared to invite empathy and community-building among peers.

In a closer case study of two focal participants—Mai and Niran—the emotional scaffolding function of digital storytelling was especially pronounced. Mai, who initially showed high anxiety in speaking tasks, created a story about her experience of moving to a new school and losing her best friend. Her narrative was rich in emotional language and concluded with reflections on self-growth. During her post-story interview, Mai explained that “telling this story made me understand myself better and I felt lighter.” Niran’s story, centered on a sibling’s illness, used evocative music and symbolic imagery. His classmates responded with visible emotional engagement, with one peer commenting, “I didn’t know you felt this way. Thank you for sharing.”

These individual cases exemplify how digital storytelling can offer therapeutic dimensions in language learning. Both Mai and Niran showed improved participation in subsequent ESL class activities, including voluntary speaking in group tasks and peer feedback exchanges (Golenko et al., 2025; Koskan et al., 2025; Matwick & Matwick, 2025; Nilsson & Lönnroth, 2025; Vanaclocha-Amat et al., 2025). The emotional articulation through their stories may have served to reduce anxiety and foster a sense of agency in the learning environment. These shifts, though anecdotal, align with the broader trends observed in the classroom and substantiate the role of emotional scaffolding through narrative expression.

The interpretive synthesis of the findings confirms that digital narratives can function not only as linguistic tasks but also as emotional spaces where learners process, express, and reflect on their lived experiences. The combination of verbal, visual, and auditory modes provides a rich semiotic environment for emotional meaning-making. Emotional scaffolding through storytelling creates relational connections, enhances self-perception, and fosters engagement, thus extending the pedagogical value of digital narratives beyond the domain of language acquisition alone.

The findings of this study reveal that student-generated digital narratives serve as significant emotional scaffolds within Thai ESL classrooms. The narratives captured a wide range of emotional expressions, including happiness, sadness, fear, hope, and gratitude, with students demonstrating high levels of affective engagement. Students who typically exhibited silence or hesitation in oral tasks displayed increased participation and expressiveness when engaged in digital storytelling. The integration of multimedia components such as music, images, and narration enhanced students’ ability to articulate complex emotions, making the digital narrative a multidimensional space for emotional processing.

Results also showed a moderate positive correlation between emotional depth in storytelling and self-reported language confidence. Students who invested emotionally in their stories perceived improvements in their English communication skills, particularly in speaking and writing. Classroom observations supported this perception, as emotionally rich stories attracted more peer engagement, fostering empathy and community-building. The case studies of two focal participants, Mai and Niran, demonstrated how digital storytelling allowed them to confront personal challenges and contributed to their increased classroom participation and emotional resilience.

This evidence underscores the pedagogical potential of digital storytelling in addressing the affective barriers commonly encountered by ESL learners. Emotional scaffolding through storytelling enabled students to develop a sense of psychological safety, which in turn created more space for linguistic risk-taking and creativity. The digital narrative process appeared to mediate both emotional and academic outcomes, providing students with a reflective space to process personal experiences while developing second language skills.

The study provides concrete confirmation that language learning is not merely a cognitive endeavor but an emotional one as well. The stories produced by students reflect not only their linguistic ability but also their capacity to make sense of emotional experiences in a second language. By positioning students as storytellers of their own lived realities, the learning process becomes personalized and emotionally meaningful. These findings affirm the value of emotionally responsive pedagogy in second language acquisition contexts.

This study supports and extends previous research on digital storytelling in language learning, such as Robin (2008), who identified its cognitive and motivational benefits, and Yang & Wu (2012), who highlighted its effect on learner autonomy and engagement. However, this research diverges from most prior studies by focusing on emotional scaffolding rather than cognitive or motivational factors alone. The emphasis on affective dimensions, especially in an Asian context where emotional expression may be culturally restrained, marks a significant contribution to the existing literature.

Other studies, particularly those conducted in Western contexts, tend to regard emotional expression as more natural or culturally acceptable. In contrast, this research highlights how digital narratives can circumvent such cultural constraints and offer Thai students a more private, creative, and emotionally safe outlet. The emotional insights uncovered here fill a gap in regional scholarship, which has largely underexplored the psychological dimensions of language learning in Southeast Asian classrooms. This localized perspective adds new depth to global understandings of affect in ESL pedagogy.

These results point to a more expansive role for narrative in language education, beyond the familiar domains of fluency, coherence, or grammar. Emotional meaning-making becomes a central part of how students negotiate their identities and communicative intentions in the target language. The findings also suggest that emotionally resonant learning tasks can reframe students' relationships with English from one of anxiety and distance to one of personal relevance and empowerment (Çakmak & Andujar, 2025; Deroo et al., 2025; Gunawan et al., 2025; Kuntjara et al., 2025; Leproni, 2025; Vats et al., 2025). Digital storytelling thus becomes a bridge not just to communication, but to self-expression and emotional awareness.

The study's focus on emotional scaffolding offers theoretical advancement by linking second language acquisition with affective psychology. The results confirm that emotions are not peripheral but central to how learners experience and internalize language learning processes. The integration of emotional awareness into ESL instruction may help dismantle the false dichotomy between affect and cognition in educational design. Educators and researchers must therefore consider emotional variables when developing tools and strategies for effective language learning.

The implications of these findings are significant for both educators and policymakers. Given the positive impact of digital storytelling on emotional engagement, schools should consider incorporating narrative-based media projects into language curricula. ESL teachers may benefit from training on how to guide students through emotionally sensitive topics, helping them structure stories that are both personally meaningful and linguistically rich. Digital storytelling can be used not only as an assessment tool but also as an intervention to support student well-being and socio-emotional learning.

Curriculum developers are encouraged to view language instruction through a holistic lens that values student affect as much as academic performance. Emotional scaffolding techniques, such as narrative-based reflection, peer storytelling circles, and multimodal composition, can enhance classroom climate and student motivation (Giri & Stolterman, 2025; Pérez-Ordóñez et al., 2025; Prabowo et al., 2025). The use of technology in this context should be framed not only in

terms of innovation, but also in terms of empathy, connection, and identity development. These approaches align with global movements in inclusive and humanizing education.

Stakeholders in teacher education should consider integrating modules on emotional literacy, narrative pedagogy, and digital multimodality into teacher preparation programs. Language teachers equipped with such tools can better respond to the emotional needs of their students and cultivate more responsive learning environments. The findings suggest that emotional scaffolding through storytelling is especially useful for supporting students with low confidence or limited communicative competence. In this way, emotional scaffolding becomes a mechanism for inclusion and equity in ESL contexts.

The broader implication is that emotional scaffolding should be recognized as a core component of effective language instruction, not a peripheral or optional enhancement. Emotional development and language learning are fundamentally intertwined processes, and digital storytelling offers a powerful way to support both simultaneously. Integrating such practices into educational systems could transform not only how languages are taught but also how learners see themselves as communicators, creators, and individuals.

The observed results may be attributed to the cognitive-emotional synergy embedded in the storytelling process. Constructing a digital narrative requires students to retrieve personal memories, make evaluative judgments, and synthesize multimodal forms of expression. This combination of cognitive and affective processing creates conditions conducive to deep engagement and sustained motivation. The emotional content becomes the vehicle through which language becomes authentic and personally resonant.

The medium of digital storytelling—enabling the use of images, music, sound, and text—may further enhance emotional accessibility. Students can express ideas beyond their current linguistic capacity, relying on visuals and sounds to bridge expressive gaps. This semiotic richness reduces performance anxiety and encourages a sense of authorship and creative control. When learners feel ownership over their stories, they are more willing to take linguistic risks and more likely to engage deeply with the content.

The correlation between emotional depth and language confidence reflects the motivational boost students experience when language learning becomes emotionally meaningful. When learners perceive that English allows them to say something they care about, they are more invested in the process of learning. The act of telling a story becomes not just an academic task but a personal mission, with emotional stakes that drive effort and persistence. This internal motivation is difficult to replicate through traditional grammar or vocabulary drills.

Another contributing factor may lie in the cultural context. Thai students, often educated in high-stakes, exam-driven systems, rarely have the opportunity to express vulnerability or subjectivity in academic settings. Digital storytelling presents a rare space where the personal becomes pedagogical. The format allows emotional truth to be conveyed in safe, structured, and creative ways, opening new channels for communication and understanding. These socio-cultural affordances likely shaped the impact observed in this study.

The next step is to scale and adapt digital storytelling practices across different language learning levels, age groups, and educational contexts. Future studies might explore its effectiveness with younger learners, adult ESL populations, or multilingual classrooms. Research could also examine long-term effects on language proficiency, emotional resilience, and learner identity over extended periods. These insights would strengthen the evidence base for policy recommendations and pedagogical innovation.

Teacher professional development programs must begin to include emotional scaffolding as a deliberate instructional strategy. By equipping educators with tools to facilitate emotionally resonant storytelling, classrooms can evolve into spaces of empathy, reflection, and mutual understanding. Further exploration is also warranted into the intersections of digital storytelling with trauma-informed education, inclusive practices, and mental health support in schools.

Policy frameworks that support emotionally responsive education should consider including digital storytelling as a core component of ESL curriculum reform. Educational stakeholders need to recognize the dual role of language as both a cognitive skill and a medium of emotional experience. Resources, training, and time must be allocated to ensure that digital narratives are not treated as peripheral or supplementary but central to holistic learner development.

Building on this study, researchers and practitioners must continue to explore how narrative, emotion, and digital media intersect to shape second language learning. The call is not simply to integrate technology for engagement, but to design learning experiences that validate the human stories behind every learner. In doing so, education moves beyond transactional goals toward a transformative, affective, and inclusive practice.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of digital storytelling as a powerful emotional scaffold that supports Thai ESL students in articulating, processing, and reflecting on personal experiences through the medium of a second language. Unlike prior studies that focused primarily on the cognitive or linguistic benefits of digital narratives, this research foregrounds the affective dimension—highlighting how students engaged with emotional content such as sadness, hope, and resilience, and how this emotional engagement contributed to increased confidence and classroom participation. Emotional expression was not merely a by-product but a central outcome of the storytelling process, suggesting that emotional literacy can be cultivated alongside language skills in ESL contexts.

The contribution of this research lies in its conceptual and methodological advancement of narrative-based ESL pedagogy by framing digital storytelling not just as a communicative or creative activity, but as an emotionally responsive pedagogical tool. The use of a qualitative case study approach allowed for a detailed and holistic examination of how student-generated digital narratives operate as emotional spaces, particularly in culturally nuanced environments where affective expression is often restrained. This dual focus—on affect and identity—enriches existing pedagogical models by integrating emotional scaffolding into second language instruction in a systematic and evidence-based manner.

This study is limited by its contextual focus on a single cultural and educational setting, which may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences in other ESL contexts. The small sample size, while adequate for qualitative depth, restricts generalizability. Future research should explore comparative studies across different countries, age groups, and proficiency levels to assess the adaptability and scalability of emotional scaffolding through digital narratives. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the lasting effects of emotional engagement on language development, identity formation, and learner resilience over time.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Pong Krit: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Lit Som: Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Siri Lek: Supervision; Validation; Other contribution; Resources; Visuali-zation; Writing - original draft.

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