

Between Heritage and Community: Restoration of Heritage Projects in Bahrain through Participatory Design

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Abstract

In recent years, Bahrain's heritage districts have gone through major urban transformations, especially through projects led by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) in areas such as Muharraq and the Pearling Path. These projects have successfully conserved Bahrain's architectural identity while also attracting tourism and international recognition. However, despite the success of these developments, questions still remain regarding the role of local communities within the planning and design process of these heritage spaces.

Today, architecture is moving beyond the idea of simply designing buildings towards creating spaces that respond to people, public life and community experience (Gehl, 2011). International frameworks such as Public Interest Design (PID), promoted by the American Institute of Architects, encourage architects to involve communities and consider the social impact of projects throughout the design process (AIA, 2014). Despite this growing emphasis on participation, community involvement within Bahrain's heritage urban projects still appears limited and not formally integrated into professional practice frameworks (Government of Bahrain, 2014).

This research explores the relationship between urban development and participatory design in Bahrain, focusing specifically on BACA-led projects. The paper investigates whether local communities are sufficiently involved in shaping these heritage environments and how participatory design approaches could improve experience publicly, urban identity and social connection in the heritage spots.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology through literature review, comparative framework analysis, questionnaire-based assessment, and case study evaluation. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to architectural professional practice in Bahrain by proposing more inclusive and socially responsive approaches towards heritage urban development.

Keywords: Participatory Design, Heritage Regeneration, Cultural Identity, Public Interest Design, Community Participation.

Introduction

Heritage spaces in Bahrain have become an important part of the Island's urban and cultural development in recent years. Through project led by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA), areas such as Muharraq and the Pearling Path have been transformed through restoration projects, adaptive reuse, museums, public spaces and cultural events (BACA, 2023). These projects have played a major role in conserving Bahrain's Architectural identity while also introducing heritage areas as active urban destinations rather than isolated historical sites.

Simultaneously, architecture and urban design today focus on people and public experience rather than only physical preservation. Jan Gehl (2011) explains that successful urban environments should support everyday social interaction and public life, while participatory design theories argue that communities should actively contribute to shaping the spaces they use (Sanoff, 2000). Similarly, Public Interest Design (PID) frameworks promoted by the American Institute of Architects encourage architects to engage with communities and consider broader social responsibilities within the design process (AIA, 2014).

Despite this international shift toward participation and user-centered urbanism, community participation within Bahrain's heritage projects still appears relatively limited within formal professional practice frameworks. Bahrain's current regulatory system, governed by the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professionals, mainly focuses on licensing, qualifications and technical regulations without clearly integrating public participation within urban development process (Government of Bahrain, 2014).

This issue becomes especially significant in heritage districts because these environments are strongly connected to memory, identity and everyday urban life. While Bahrain's heritage projects successfully preserve historic architecture and attract tourism, questions continue to emerge regarding whether these spaces fully reflect the needs and experiences of local communities. Recent debates surrounding the demolition of the parking structures designed by Christian Kerez in Muharraq in early 2026 intensified discussions regarding public accessibility, usability and relationship between iconic heritage projects and local urban needs (Domus, 2026).

In this context, this research investigates how participatory design approaches could improve heritage urban development in Bahrain, particularly within BACA-led projects. Its aim is to explore the relationship between heritage preservation, public experience and community participation, while examining how more inclusive approaches could contribute to creating socially responsive and publicly connected heritage spaces.

The objectives of this research are as follows

1. To investigate the extent to which participatory design principles are integrated within heritage urban development projects in Bahrain
2. To identify the gap between international participatory design frameworks and the current integration of participation within Bahrain's professional and heritage urban practices.
3. To critically evaluate BACA-led heritage projects in relation to community engagement

Theoretical Framework

Public Interest Design (PID)

Public Interest Design appeared as an architectural approach that amplifies the role of architects and designers beyond mere technical problem-solving towards informing wider social, cultural and needs of community (Bell, 2013). The American Institute of Architects recognizes PID as a significant part of ethical

responsibility that architects and professionals carry to engage with local communities and consider the social influence and impact of projects throughout the design period (AIA, 2014).

Additionally, PID argues that architecture should not aim to produce aesthetical successful spaces, but also improve the overall public experience, social connections, accessibility concerns and the quality of life in that space. Participation of stakeholders therefore becomes a non-negotiable component of successful urban and architectural spaces as it allows communities and individual users to contribute to how spaces are shaped as they actively inhabit them after the design is complete (Sanoff, 2000).

In the discussion regarding heritage environment, PID is especially significant because historical urban spaces are closely linked to identity, memory and collective cultural experience. Consequently, heritage rehabilitation projects that do not sufficient involve local community may risk becoming visually conserved spaces completely disconnected from everyday community life (Smith, 2006).

Community Engagement and Participatory Design Approaches

Participatory design principles highlight the significance of involving communities and relevant stakeholders throughout the design and planning process. According to Sanoff (2000), participation of community reinforces the relevance of the project by integrating local knowledge, accommodate user needs and learn from social experience to incorporate design processes smoothly. Gehl (2011) also explains that successful urban developments should prioritize people, movement and public interaction instead of focusing on aesthetics and physical forms only.

Participation within urban design makes for a stronger public ownership and long-term social sustainability. Contemporary urban design discussions recognize that communities should not only experience spaces after design is complete, but also contribute to shaping these spaces during development stages (Gehl, 2011).

These theories become highly relevant in heritage districts where the integration of memory, cultural identity and public life is directly connected to the urban space it is in. Ultimately, participatory design approaches are discussed internationally as necessary components of successful heritage rehabilitation projects.

Cultural Identity and Urban Heritage

Urban heritage or heritage urbanism investigates the relationship between heritage conservation, urban identity and contemporary daily life. Smith (2006) argues that heritage should not only be perceived as the conservation of physical buildings or structures, but also as a cultural and social process shaped by the collective memory and everyday social experience in a space.

In the Gulf region, heritage rehabilitation has increasingly become linked to tourism revival, cultural branding and economic diversification (Al-Saidi and Zaidan, 2024). Historical districts are usually transformed into cultural destinations through restoration projects, adaptive reuse and public cultural programming. While these projects contribute to architectural identity preservation, concerns continue to appear regarding heritage spaces and their connection to local communities and everyday social life in the urban context.

BACA-led Heritage Urban Developments: Insights from Bahrain

The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) has contributed in many ways in reshaping the heritage urban scene of Bahrain, especially through projects developed in Muharraq and along the Pearling Path. These projects combine heritage revitalization, adaptive reuse, tourism attractions, museums,

cultural hotspots and public space interventions to reactivate historical districts and reinforce Bahrain's cultural identity regionally and internationally (BACA, 2023).

The Pearling Path, one of the internationally recognized projects in Bahrain became a UNESCO World Heritage Site and introduced a large-scale rehabilitation strategy across Muharraq. The project aimed to reconnect historical houses, public squares, and cultural sites through an integrated heritage route (Matar and Baper, 2016).

Additionally, BACA also introduced cultural activation initiatives like Muharraq Nights, public events, local and international exhibitions, coffee shops and various adaptive reuse projects which are intended to reactive public life in the historical districts of Bahrain (BACA, 2023). These strategies drastically changed heritage locations into active cultural destinations rather than isolated conserved monuments.

However, with the success of these projects achieve international visibility and cultural tourism attraction came discussions regarding the extent to which local communities and residents participate actively in the planning and development processes. More recent debates surrounding the demolition of the parking structure in Muharraq designed by Christian Kerez intensified the public regarding functionality, accessibility, public experience and the relationship between local community needs and iconic architectural interventions (Domus, 2026).

Eventually, BACA's projects provide a significant case through which the relationship between heritage conservation, participatory design approaches and public urban experience can be critically investigated within Bahrain's professional and urban contexts.

Review of Literature

Literature Background

Contemporary architectural discussions increasingly highlight participation and community involvement as significant component of a successful urban development. The American Institute of Architects facilitates Public Interest Design as an approach that motivates architects to tackles wider social responsibilities and interact directly with communities throughout the design phase (AIA, 2014). Additionally, the Royal Institute of British Architects identifies community engagement and public wellbeing as significant ethical responsibilities within the architectural professional practice (RIBA, 2019; RIBA, 2020).

Theoretical discussions around participatory urbanism argues further that involving the communities in design and planning processes contributes to a stronger social relevance, meaningful urban spaces and public ownership (Sanoff, 2000). Similarly, Gehl (2011) explains that that a successful urban space should prioritize user interactions and support everyday public life rather than focus on aesthetics or tourism-oriented development.

Smith (2006) argues that heritage should not only function as a physical conservation of the building itself, but also as a socially experienced environment that is connected to identity, memory and everyday community life. These discussions are highly relevant in cities of the Gulf region, especially where heritage regeneration initiatives are often associated with tourism development, economic diversification and cultural branding (Al-Saidi and Zaidan, 2024).

In Bahrain, projects led by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities have transformed successfully numerous historical districts like Muharraq by restoration projects, adaptive reuse interventions and public cultural programming (BACA, 2023). The Pearling Path, specifically, became internationally known as a successful heritage-led urban redevelopment project that connects historical houses and public spaces through a cultural urban route (Matar and Baper, 2016).

However, despite the international recognition of Bahrain's heritage regeneration projects, community engagement and participation are not formally integrated within regulatory and professional frameworks. The current professional system in Bahrain governed by the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions mainly focuses on licensing, qualifications and technical guidelines without explicitly stating that public participation is integrated within urban development processes (Government of Bahrain, 2014).

Recent debates regarding BACA projects reflects these concerns further. The demolition of the parking structures designed by Christian Kerez in Muharraq in the early 2026 brought up discussions regarding functionality, accessibility and the relationship between local community needs and iconic heritage interventions (Domus, 2026). While these projects contribute to tourism and cultural visibility, the questions remain to come up regarding who are the heritage spaces eventually designed for and does the local community actively contribute to shaping them or not.

Synthesis of Literature

Literature above reveals a growing international focus on community-oriented urban development and participatory approaches through recognized frameworks like participatory urbanism and Public Interest Design principles. In parallel, Bahrain's heritage rehabilitation projects continue to contribute to urban revitalization and cultural conservation. However, the literature also reveals a gap between international participatory design principles and the practical integration of community participation in Bahrain's heritage urban regeneration processes.

Ultimately, this research examines how participatory design processes could reinforce the relationship between heritage conservation, community identity and public experience in Bahrain's evolving urban context.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the relationship between participatory design and heritage urban development in Bahrain. The study focuses especially on projects led by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA), particularly developments within Muharraq and the Pearling Path. The methodology combines comparative framework analysis, assessment of questionnaires and case study observations in order to evaluate how community participation is addressed within Bahrain heritage urban projects.

The research methodology was developed to support the main objective of the study, which is to study whether Bahrain's heritage urban developments sufficiently integrate Public Interest Design (PID) and community participation within the planning and design processes. Additionally, the methodology aims to identify the gap between internationally recognized participatory frameworks and the current implementation of heritage urban development practices in Bahrain. The main research methods conducted were as follows.

- Comparative framework analysis
- Questionnaire survey
- Case study analysis
- Data Analysis and Interpretation

Comparative Framework Analysis

A comparative framework analysis was conducted to evaluate how participation and engagement by the community are addressed within local and international professional practice frameworks.

The analysis compared:

- The American Institute of Architects' Public Interest Design (PID) principles
- The Royal Institute of British Architects' ethical and participatory guidelines
- Bahrain's professional framework governed by the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions

The comparison focused on identifying:

- References to community participation
- Stakeholder engagement
- Public responsibility and accountability
- Social response design approaches in the professional practice regulations

This method was used to identify the gap between internationally recognized participatory design principles and the current implementation of participation within Bahrain's heritage urban development framework (AIA, 2014; RIBA, 2019, Government of Bahrain, 2014).

Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire was adopted as the primary field research method to investigate perceptions and points of views of community in their engagement during participatory design within Bahrain's heritage urban developments. The questionnaire provided direct insight into how professionals and users within the build environment perceive participation, public engagement and socially responsive urban development practices in Bahrain.

The questionnaire was especially valuable to this research because it addressed themes directly related to participatory design, public experience, involvement of community and professional practice in architecture which strongly align with the objectives of the research investigating participation within BACA-organized heritage projects. The responses therefore contributed to understanding how active participation is currently perceived within Bahrain's urban and heritage context while supporting the evaluation of existing gaps between international frameworks inspiring participation and the implementation systems locally.

The questionnaire was shared intentionally within participants, having architectural and designer backgrounds. A total of 31 responses were collected through Google Forms. The structure of the questionnaire was developed based on theoretical discussions surrounding participatory urbanism, heritage urbanism and public experience within urban spaces (Sanoff, 2000; Gehl 2011).

Case Study Analysis

Moreover, the research adopted selected BACA-led heritage projects as case studies for analysis. They were as follows.

- The Pearling Path
- Heritage rehabilitation projects in Muharraq
- Adaptive reuse interventions
- Public cultural spaces in heritage districts

These projects were selected because they represent some of the Kingdom's most influential heritage urban developments and provide important examples of the relationship between:

- Heritage conservation
- Tourism development and attraction
- Urban identity
- Public interaction

- Community experience

The case study analysis focused on evaluating public usability, movement, interaction, cultural activation and evidence of public engagement in spaces.

Moreover, the research considered recent public debates surrounding BACA projects, especially the demolition of the parking structures in Muharraq in early 2026 (Domus, 2026). The incident was analyzed as part of broader discussions regarding public accessibility, safety and the relationship between iconic heritage interventions and local urban needs (Domus, 2026).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected from the framework analysis, questionnaires and case studies were analyzed comparatively in order to identify the gap between the international participatory design principles and current heritage urban practices within Bahrain.

The findings were interpreted in relation to participatory urbanism, heritage urbanism, and public experience theories in order to evaluate how participation from community members could contribute to creating more socially responsive and publicly connected heritage spaces.

The analysis aimed to propose recommendations for strengthening participatory approaches within Bahrain's heritage urban project practices while enhancing the relationship between conservation of heritage public experience and community identity.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this research reveal a significant gap between internationally promoted participatory design concepts and the practical implementation of participations within Bahrain's heritage urban development. While BACA-led projects have contributed to cultural conservation, tourism attraction and international visibility, the research findings indicate that participation and public engagement remain limited within the planning and assessment of these heritage environments.

The analysis combines findings from:

- Comparative framework analysis
- Questionnaire survey
- Case study observations
- In order to critically evaluate how participation is currently positioned within Bahrain's heritage urbanism.

Comparative Framework Findings

The comparative framework analysis revealed clear differences between international participatory frameworks and Bahrain's current professional practice structure. The American Institute of Architects Public Interest Design (PID) principles position architects as socially responsible professionals who should engage directly with communities and consider public impacts through a broader lens on the design process (AIA, 2014). Similarly, the Royal Institute of British Architects emphasize the consultation of stakeholder and public wellbeing as part of the ethical architectural practice (RIBA, 2019).

In contrast, the framework in Bahrain governed by the CRPEP mainly focuses on professional regulation, licensing and technical matters of qualifications without integrating participation or public engagement systematically in the architectural or planning process (Government of Bahrain, 2014).

This finding demonstrates that participation within Bahrain's heritage developments is not institutionally embedded, but instead remains dependent on individual project approaches or cultural initiatives led by BACA. As a result, heritage urban development in Bahrain tends to prioritize conservation and tourism-oriented outcomes over long term community involvement.

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire findings revealed a strong professional awareness regarding the importance of participatory design community-oriented urban development within Bahrain. Most respondents agreed that community involvement contributes positively to urban quality, public experience and socially responsive design approaches.

From your professional experience, how often is the community involved in design decisions?

31 responses

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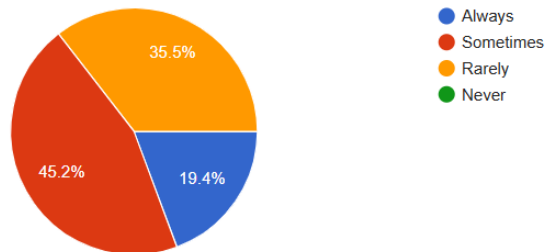


Fig. 1: Questions from Questionnaire
Source: Author, 2026.

Participants further expressed concern regarding the limited opportunities for public engagement within existing urban development processes in Bahrain. A recurring theme across responses was that public participation often occurs after project completion through public use and interaction rather than during design and planning phases.

Although the questionnaire did not specifically focus on heritage projects, the findings provide broader insight into how participation is currently perceived within Bahrain's built environment disciplines. These perceptions become relevant especially when examined in parallel with BACA-led heritage developments, where urban interventions operate similarly through a top-down development processes.

What do you think are the ways in which architects in Bahrain can contribute to organizing more community-oriented designs?

30 responses

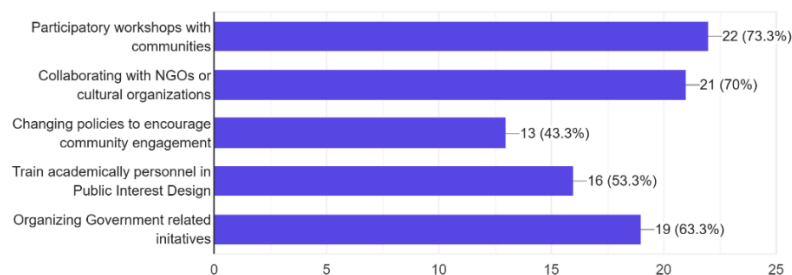


Fig. 2: Questions from the Questionnaire
Source: Author, 2026

The responses also reflect concern regarding prioritizing of images, branding and aesthetical gains over long-term community and public integration. Critically, this suggests that participation within urban development context of Bahrain remains more observational than collaborative, where the public mainly experience completed projects rather than contributing in their design.

When interpreted alongside the case-study observations, the questionnaire findings support the argument that participation within Bahrain's heritage urbanism remains insufficiently institutionalized within both professional practice and urban development processes

Case Study Analysis

Pearling Path and Heritage Rehabilitation in Muharraq

The Pearling Path represents one of Bahrain's most intentionally recognized heritage urban projects and reveals BACA's strong commitment towards conservation and cultural revitalization. The project reconnects historical houses, pathways, museums and public interventions through a continuous heritage route across Muharraq.

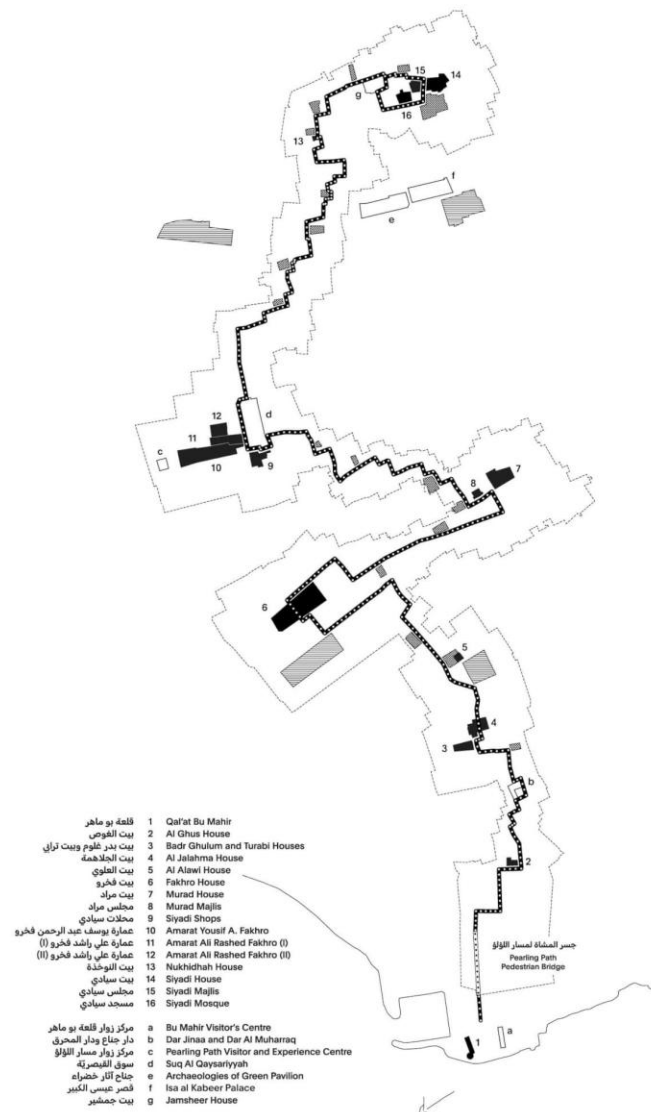


Fig. 3: Urban Map of the Pearling Path

Source: Karimi, 2024

From an urban outlook, the project successfully preserved heritage architecture, activates cultural tourism and improves the aesthetical identity aesthetically. The adaptive reuse of historical buildings and integration cultural programs also contributes to maintaining visibility of Bahrain's historical narrative in the contemporary city.

However, the findings indicate that the project functions more effectively as a curate heritage experience rather than a fully participatory urban space. While the Pearling Path introduces public accessibility and cultural programming, evidence of direct community participation within the design and planning process remains relatively unclear.

This reflects Smith's (2006) argument that heritage developments frequently prioritize representation and conservation over active social product of place. The heritage space becomes carefully manages but consumed culturally, yet less socially negotiated by the communities who live in it.

Christian Kerez Parking Structure Debate

The demolition of the parking designed by Christian Kerez in Muharraq in early 2026 became an important case particularly within this research because it exposed tensions between functionality, iconic architectural interventions and local urban experience (Domus, 2026).



Fig 4: Circulating AI Image of the Demolition of the Parking
Source: Domus, 2026

Although the project was internationally recognized architecturally, public criticism surrounding accessibility, practicality and integration with the local urban life revealed a big disconnect between architectural intention and everyday public life.

Critically, this debate demonstrated that architectural prestige alone does not necessarily guarantee successful urban integration. The incident additionally highlighted the consequences of limited participatory assessment process within heritage urban projects. The findings suggest that strong community engagement and user-based assessment could contribute to more socially responsive heritage interventions that balance:

- Cultural conservation
- Public usability
- Architectural experimentation

Conclusions

This research investigated the relationship between participatory design and heritage urban development within Bahrain, focusing on BACA-led projects in Muharraq and the Pearling Path specifically. The findings contributed to cultural preservation, tourism development and international recognitions, participation and community engagement remain insufficiently integrated within the broader development process.

The comparative framework analysis revealed a clear gap between participatory design principles from international frameworks promoted by organizations such as RIBA and AIA and Bahrain's current professional CRPEP that governs professional practice in Bahrain. While international frameworks position public involvement and participation more and more as ethical responsibilities for architects, the local framework in Bahrain continues to prioritize regulatory and technical functions over the social aspect of design approach.

The questionnaire findings demonstrated further that professionals and users within Bahrain recognize the value of community-oriented participation and urbanism. However, respondents identified a lack of formal opportunities for communities to contribute to heritage planning and design decision making actively in the field. Therefore, participation remains limited mainly to experiencing heritage environments that are completed rather than collaboratively shaping them.

Additionally, the case-study analysis revealed that projects like the Pearling Paths successfully conserve Bahrain's architectural identity and reactivate historic districts economically and culturally. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that many heritage spaces operate more effectively as curate cultural destinations than as fully participatory public urban environments. The emphasis on visual conservation, cultural branding and tourism development rarely appears stronger than the integration of everyday public life and long-term community interaction.

Critically, the research reveals that conservation of heritage alone does not automatically produce socially responsive urbanism. Successful heritage environments require not only conservation of architecture of also meaningful engagement with communities who experience and live in these places daily. Without the implementation of stronger participatory mechanisms, heritage urban development risks becoming representational rather than socially integrated.

The research concludes that Bahrain's heritage urban future would benefit from more structured participatory approaches integrated in professional practice and urban development process. Public workshop, community consultations, user-based evaluation and collaborative urban programming could reinforce the relationship between preservation, public experience and local identity.

Finally, the study argues that participatory design should not be viewed as separate from heritage preservation, but rather as an essential component of creating heritage spaces that remain culturally meaningful, active socially and publicly connected within Bahrain's evolving urban landscape.

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Statement of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in carrying out this research.

Ethical Practice

This research followed accepted ethical practices. The study did not involve interviews with living individuals, the collection of confidential personal data, or any form of coercion or pressure on the participants.

Availability of Data:

Data presented in this research is available for scrutiny by any legitimate organization.

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