



## **JOURNAL OF CREATIVE INDUSTRY AND SUSTAINABLE CULTURE**

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jcisc>

How to cite this article:

Abdul Halim, M. Q., Zainal Abidin, A. H., & Ismail, A. I. (2025). Examining Transmedia Character Engagement: Malaysian Audiences' Connections With Tony Stark, Phil Coulson And Matt Murdock In The Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Journal of Creative Industry and Sustainable Culture*, 4 (9), 132-143. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jcisc2025.4.9>

### **EXAMINING TRANSMEDIA CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT: MALAYSIAN AUDIENCES' CONNECTIONS WITH TONY STARK, PHIL COULSON AND MATT MURDOCK IN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE**

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Received: 31/7/2025

Revised: 12/8/2025

Accepted: 1/9/2025

Published: 31/10/2025

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores character engagement among Malaysian fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), focusing on three central transmedia figures: Tony Stark, Phil Coulson, and Matt Murdock. Constructed from theories of transmedia storytelling, parasocial interaction (PSI), and character identification, the research investigates how audiences emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally connect with characters across platforms. Employing a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 300 respondents of MCU fans in Malaysia. The study used a validated instrument to measure four dimensions of character engagement namely interest in, knowledge of, identification with, and interaction with. The findings revealed that Tony Stark's character obtained the highest level of engagement ( $M = 4.75$ ), followed by Phil Coulson and Matt Murdock (both  $M = 4.60$ ), with all three scores falling within the "high engagement" range. The study attributes Stark's dominance to his complex moral value, emotional depth, and consistent presence across multiple media formats, which contributes to strong parasocial relationships. Results underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping character value and also highlighting how Malaysian audiences align with characters that display both vulnerability and heroic transformation. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on transmedia fandom and character driven

engagement in Southeast Asia. Future research should consider a broader range of characters, a qualitative research design and cross-cultural comparisons to further explore the evolving nature of global media consumption.

**Keywords:** Audience engagement, Character engagement, Marvel cinematic, Parasocial interaction, Transmedia storytelling.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Character development in narrative film storytelling is essential to give audience emotion of certain desire character mode. The exploration of character engagement within the context of transmedia storytelling, particularly within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) provides significant insights into how audiences interact with fictional narratives across various media. Transmedia storytelling is the concept where elements of a narrative are strategically dispersed across multiple platforms to create a cohesive experience for the audience. This approach involves aligning characters and storyline in such a manner that they portray across films, television series, comic books, and digital platforms. This significantly enhance emotional and narrative immersion among fans (Schiller, 2018, Tazijan et al., 2023).

Characters like Tony Stark (Iron Man) in Films, Phil Coulson (Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D) TV Series, and Matt Murdock (Daredevil) Online Streaming are prime examples of how transmedia storytelling strengthened emotional connections with fans through their respective narratives. Tony Stark is the prime example of MCU's cinematic journey. The Tony Stark character exhibits a complex and evolving emotional value that aligns with fans' expectations of a superhero making him a dominant character for engagement (Velasco et al., 2024; Scolari, 2013). The character's transitions from a self-indulgent industrialist to a self-sacrificing hero illustrate themes of redemption and responsibility, thus appealing to the audience's quests for relatable moral dilemmas (Scolari, 2013). Similarly, Phil Coulson serves as an essential role character within the MCU narrative, providing continuity and cohesion across various titles, building a recognizable persona that fans can connect with (Velasco et al., 2024; Scolari, 2013).

In contrast, Matt Murdock introduces a different side of character engagement through his moral complexity and darker narrative themes present in the Netflix series, which primarily targets a more mature audience segment (Tazijan et al., 2023). The role of each character across these platforms exemplifies the transmedia strategy's potential to engage with distinct audience demographics by leveraging different media types, thus expanding the narrative's reach and deepening emotional engagement (Schiller, 2018).

Moreover, investigations into character engagement reveal that factors such as cultural context play a pivotal role in how different audience segments connect with characters. In Southeast Asia, and specifically Malaysia, the fan culture surrounding the MCU is burgeoning, revealing how local audiences perceive and interact with these characters (Tazijan et al., 2023). Such cultural specificity is essential for understanding character resonance within this demographic, as it underscores the need for nuanced approaches to character marketing and narrative construction that address local sentiment and values (Tazijan et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to systematically measure and compare the engagement levels of Malaysian Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fans specifically Tony Stark, Phil Coulson, and Matt Murdock. The goal is to discern which character evokes the strongest emotional response and considering factors such as narrative complexity and character development that specific to Malaysian audiences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Transmedia Storytelling and Character Continuity**

Transmedia storytelling has evolved into a prominent narrative approach that reshapes how stories are constructed and experienced across various platforms by offering deeper engagement for audiences. Transmedia storytelling is characterized by the strategic dissemination of narrative content across multiple media platforms, where each medium contributes uniquely to the narrative of the story (Nagy et al., 2022). Jenkins (2006), a prominent scholar in transmedia storytelling mention that the meaning of transmedia storytelling is where each of medium serves as a unique narrative component of the story by offering distinct perspectives and experiences related to the characters (Nagy et al., 2022). This multiplicity not only enhances narrative depth and complexity but also cultivates an immersive experience that binds the audience to the evolving story world and its characters (Ecenbarger, 2016).

Character continuity within transmedia narratives plays a fundamental role in maintaining audience engagement. A salient illustration of this is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where characters like Tony Stark exemplify the successful integration of narrative arcs across films, television series, and digital platforms. Over the span of over a decade, Stark's character has undergone significant development, making him a central role in the franchise's narrative framework (Nagy et al., 2022). This continuity fosters an allegiance among fans, creating a profound sense of investment in the characters' journeys and backstories, which have been meticulously crafted across various media formats. Pastor-Sánchez and Pérez (2018) mention that, characters serve as narrative anchors that reinforce a sense of narrative coherence resonating with audiences globally.

### **Character Engagement and Parasocial Interaction**

Furthermore, transmedia storytelling not only facilitates narrative continuity but also enhances emotional connectivity and identification with characters through mechanisms such as parasocial interaction (PSI) (Heilemann et al., 2017). PSI refers to the one-sided relationships that audiences cultivate with media figures, wherein viewers begin to relate to characters on a personal level, almost as though they are part of their real-world social networks (Kustritz, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly salient in transmedia contexts, where repeated exposure to characters across platforms amplifies audience investment in these fictional personas. Empirical research indicates that characters who embody a moral arc or relatable flaws typically encourage deeper audience identification and emotional engagement. For example, characters like Tony Stark are designed with complex psychological profiles that resonate with audiences, enhancing their emotional involvement in the narrative (Heilemann et al., 2017; Kustritz, 2021).

The dynamics of audience engagement also reflect broader cultural contexts, highlighting how cultural differences influence interaction with transmedia narratives. Studies have demonstrated that regional

variations in cultural consumption patterns, as well as societal influences, significantly shape how audiences perceive character relevance and moral alignment (Hovious et al., 2018). Such insights are critical, particularly in the case of the MCU, which navigates diverse cultural landscapes while ensuring that character-driven storytelling remains cohesive and engaging. Notably, this cultural specificity serves to illustrate the global phenomena of fandom that transmedia storytelling can incite, reinforcing the necessity of adapting narratives to fit local contexts (Amirulloh & Zikri, 2019). The complex interplay of cultural influences further emphasizes the need for transmedia storytelling scholarship to account for diverse audience experiences, ensuring narratives resonate across cultural boundaries.

In the realm of character engagement, a more nuanced understanding emerges through the interplay of various theories of audience interaction. Identification theory suggests that audiences adopt the perspectives and values of characters, complements the study of PSI (Pastor-Sánchez & Pérez, 2018). This identification process encourages emotional absorption into narratives, resulting in heightened audience engagement. Research affirms that characters with substantial moral arcs tend to cultivate deeper emotional connections with audiences, thereby enhancing the overall impact of the narrative (Rosendo, 2016). Findings by Busselle and Bilandzić (2009), who illuminate that emotional engagement enhances both narrative connectivity and viewer investment, further validating the essential role of character development in transmedia storytelling (Pastor-Sánchez & Pérez, 2018).

Transmedia storytelling's success, epitomized in franchises like the MCU, underscores its ability to foster substantial global fandoms and sustained audience loyalty through intricate character continuity. The sustained engagement of audiences is bolstered by the ability of these franchises to create emotional connections with characters through parasocial relationships and identification theory. Transmedia narratives that skillfully navigate these dynamics readily adapt and thrive within the various cultural landscapes they reach. As media consumption patterns continue to evolve, understanding the nuances of how audiences engage within these transmedia frameworks is integral to both marketing strategies and narrative innovation in the contemporary media landscape.

The participatory nature of modern audiences also necessitates a reevaluation of character roles within transmedia narratives. Prosumer engagement, which describes how audiences actively contribute in story creation or expansion, is increasingly recognized as a key driver of effective transmedia storytelling (Plessis, 2018). By allowing audiences to contribute their narratives within the established story world, entities such as the MCU foster a sense of ownership and connection that deepens engagement. For instance, the inclusion of fan-created content and merchandising has augmented fan interactions, blurring the lines between creators and consumers in meaningful ways (Scott, 2017).

### **Cultural Context and Regional Fan Engagement**

Transmedia storytelling continues to permeate various sectors of entertainment, its implications extend beyond mere storytelling frameworks; it denotes a cultural phenomenon that shapes how narratives are constructed, shared, and experienced across diverse platforms (Quiring, 2016). The proliferation of digital media and the emergence of sophisticated storytelling technologies have catalyzed this evolution, pushing the boundaries of traditional narrative forms into complex, multi-layered experiences that resonate deeply

with modern audiences. This evolution underscores the critical nature of adaptive storytelling in an ever-changing media environment, where audience expectations continually shape how narratives unfold.

The understanding of transmedia and its elements further elucidates the critical components of narrative to nurture and sustain engagement in today's media landscape. The character as a focal point in transmedia narratives acts not merely as a vessel for storytelling but as a central axis through which audiences engage emotionally and socially (Canalès, 2020). This emphasis on character-driven narratives highlights both the challenges and opportunities faced by media producers as they strive to create encompassing, engaging worlds that tap into the emotional and social zeitgeist of their audiences.

Transmedia storytelling interweaves complex character arcs with multifaceted narrative formats to create a rich tapestry of interrelated stories that engage audiences on multiple fronts. This intricate balance of character continuity, emotional engagement through PSI, and cultural relevance serves to enrich the overall narrative experience, ensuring that transmedia storytelling remains a pivotal force in contemporary media production. In this light, the importance of recognizing the various dimensions of audience engagement in transmedia settings is reaffirmed as critical for advancing both scholarship and practical understanding in the realm of media narratives.

The exploration of other successful case studies beyond the MCU offers nuanced insights into the mechanics of transmedia storytelling. Characters in different franchises, such as the adaptations of popular literature like "Harry Potter" and "The Lord of the Rings," exhibit similar traits regarding character continuity and audience investment through various platforms, thereby confirming these theoretical frameworks (Ocvirk, 2024). Observing how these narratives engage audiences worldwide can pave the way for future cross-cultural adaptations and transmedia strategies, illuminating the intersections of culture, engagement, and storytelling.

In conclusion, transmedia storytelling offers a rich and multifaceted approach to contemporary narratives that engage audiences far beyond traditional storytelling methods. The seamless integration of character continuity, emotional investment through parasocial interaction, and the consideration of cultural contexts form the bedrock of audience engagement. The future of transmedia storytelling holds immense potential for crafting narratives that transcend mere entertainment, fostering a culture of engagement, creativity, and community among audiences globally.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative survey design to explore fan engagement with three selected MCU characters namely Tony Stark, Phil Coulson, and Matt Murdock as perceived by Malaysian fans. The survey method was chosen as it effectively captures the behavior, belief, attitudes, characteristic and perception of the sample. The objective was to determine which character received the highest engagement and to understand the key dimensions contributing to character engagement. This methodology is also effective for collecting data efficiently using questionnaire upon the sample and can be done in short period of time (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2012).

## Population and Sample

A total of 300 respondents were recruited using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who identified themselves as active fans of the MCU and had viewed at least three MCU films or television series. Recruitment was conducted through Marvel-themed social media communities and online fan forums in Malaysia. The demographic composition included a diverse mix of genders, age groups (predominantly 18–35 years), and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting Malaysia's multicultural society. However, it is important to note that purposive sampling limit generalizability and future research may benefit from incorporating probability based methods.

## Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was developed by Cohen (2001) and Rubin & McHugh (1987). Based on Cohen (2001), Respondents rated each item for all three characters using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument measured 4 dimensions of character engagement namely Interest in, Knowledge of, Identification with, and Interaction with. The questionnaire was pilot-tested for internal consistency and reliability tests showed a Cronbach's alpha value above 0.80, indicating high internal consistency.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data of the study were collected using Google Forms over a four-week period. Responses for the respondent were exported to SPSS v26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation were used to compare engagement levels across the three characters. An ANOVA test was also conducted to determine statistical significance differences in mean engagement.

## DATA FINDING

### Demographic Respondents

**Table 4.1**  
**Demographic Profile of the Respondent**

| Demographic Variable | Frequency<br>(n = 300) | Percentage<br>% |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Gender</b>        |                        |                 |
| Male                 | 189                    | 63              |
| Female               | 111                    | 37              |
| Total                | 300                    | 100             |
| <b>Age</b>           |                        |                 |
| 22-25 years          | 3                      | 1               |
| 26-29 years          | 34                     | 11.3            |
| 30-33 years          | 63                     | 21              |
| More than 34 years   | 200                    | 66.7            |

|                        |     |      |
|------------------------|-----|------|
| Total                  | 300 | 100  |
| <b>Ethnic</b>          |     |      |
| Malay                  | 214 | 71.3 |
| Chinese                | 50  | 16.7 |
| Indian                 | 36  | 12   |
| Total                  | 300 | 100  |
| <b>Education Level</b> |     |      |
| Diploma                | 81  | 27   |
| Bachelor's Degree      | 161 | 53.7 |
| Master's Degree        | 19  | 6.3  |
| None                   | 39  | 13   |
| Total                  | 300 | 100  |

Table 4.1 shows that the respondents among Malaysian Marvel fans were predominantly male, comprising 189 (63%) while only 111(37%) are female fans.

In term of age, majority of the marvel cinematic universe fans in Malaysia were aged above 34 years 200 (66.7%), followed by the aged 30-33 years 63 (21%), then respondent fell in the youngest aged between 26-29 years 34 (11.3%) and last but not least the respondent aged less than 22-25 years were 3 (1%).

The distribution of the respondents on ethnic side was dominated by Malay population 214 (71.3%), followed by Chinese 50 (16.7%) and Indian 36 (12%).

In terms of respondents' level education, the result depicted that the majority of respondent 161 (53.7%) were degree holders while only 81 (27%) were diploma holders. The remaining respondent had minorities with 19 (6.3%) were Master's degree holders and last but not lease none of certificate were 39 (13%).

In shorts, majority of marvel cinematic universe fans in Malaysia were 189 (63%) male and 200 (66.7%) had an age over 34 years old. Most of the respondent 214 (71.3%) were Malay in the study. In addition, the majority of the respondents 161 (53.7%) were degree holders.

### Marvel Character Engagement

Audience engagement was measured using a 5 – point Likert scale, with higher score indicating greater engagement with the marvel character. The results are summarized in Table 4.2: -

**Table 4.2**  
**Overall Perception of the Marvel Character Engagement (n = 300)**

|              | Mean | Std.<br>Deviation | Indicator |
|--------------|------|-------------------|-----------|
| Tony Stark   | 4.75 | 0.26              | High      |
| Phil Coulson | 4.60 | 0.32              | High      |
| Matt Murdock | 4.60 | 0.33              | High      |



(Scale: 1 – 2.33 = Low, 2.34 – 3.66 = Moderate, 3.67 – 5.00 = High)

Tony Stark achieved the highest mean engagement score ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ), indicating that respondents experienced an exceptionally strong connection with this character across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. This high score underscores Tony Stark's prominent narrative presence and emotional resonance within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), likely due to his extensive character development, charismatic portrayal, and central role in the overarching transmedia storyline. The level of engagement suggests that audiences perceive him not merely as a fictional figure but as a complex, relatable persona with whom they form deep parasocial bonds (Giles, 2002). His recurring appearances across multiple platforms—including film, television, and merchandising—further reinforce his symbolic status and enhance his salience within the broader Marvel narrative ecosystem.

Phil Coulson and Matt Murdock both recorded similarly high mean scores ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.32$  and  $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ , respectively), reflecting substantial audience engagement despite their relatively limited mainstream exposure compared to Tony Stark. Phil Coulson's long-standing presence in both the MCU films and the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* television series may have fostered a sense of familiarity and continuity, contributing to audience loyalty and identification. Meanwhile, Matt Murdock, the alter ego of Daredevil, benefits from a strong fan base rooted in serialized storytelling on streaming platforms, where complex character arcs and moral ambiguity often deepen viewer involvement (Scolari, 2009). The high engagement scores for both characters affirm the effectiveness of Marvel's transmedia strategy in sustaining interest across diverse narrative forms and character archetypes.

According to the interpretation scale (1.00–2.33 = Low; 2.34–3.66 = Moderate; 3.67–5.00 = High), all three characters fall within the High engagement category. These findings support the notion that well-developed characters embedded across multiple platforms enhance audience interaction, emotional investment, and narrative continuity, hallmarks of effective transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). These results highlight how character-driven narratives can drive audience loyalty and deepen the immersive experience within the MCU universe.

## CONCLUSION

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has significantly shaped global popular culture since its inception, with Tony Stark (Iron Man) emerging as a central figure of emotional and narrative resonance, particularly Malaysian fans. The emotional arcs, moral transformations, and technological ability associated with Iron Man make him a pivotal figure in MCU narratives. Stark's journey from a self-indulgent weapons manufacturer to a self-sacrificing hero encapsulates critical character development that resonates not only in Western narratives but also in culturally diverse locales like Malaysia, where global narratives often intertwine with local sentiments (Walsh, 2022).

The character of Tony Stark operates on multiple levels, embodying traits that appeal to various audience demographics. His journey reflects significant themes of redemption and moral complexity, which serve as a foundation for audience engagement. The narrative structure present in Stark's story showcases a richly developed character background that comprises personal conflicts, social responsibilities, and an ever-



evolving ethical perspective. This complexity attracts fans willing to invest emotionally in his experiences, validating his appeal as more than just a superhero but rather a multidimensional character whose growth is both insightful and inspiring (Walsh, 2022).

Moreover, the cultural context significantly shapes character engagement in Malaysia. Malaysian audiences often show a heightened connection to characters that possess universal human traits and challenges, such as Stark's insecurities and personal struggles. This supports the claim that character can foster strong identification even within non Western audience, such as in Malaysia. The emotional depth and moral dilemmas portrayed in Stark's arc have profound implications, suggesting that well-rounded characters can successfully forge strong ties across differing cultural backdrops (Walsh, 2022).

Further analysis reveals that the narrative continuity within the MCU enables fans to engage with characters on a deeper plane. The series presents a compelling counter-narrative to traditional heroic archetypes, casting Stark as both a flawed individual and an aspirational figure. Stark's progression from a capitalist arms dealer to a protector of humanity underscores significant themes that resonate with global audiences, such as responsibility, sacrifice, and transformation. This narrative journey positions Stark as a relatable figure whose tech-savvy persona and charismatic attributes bolster his connection to modern audiences, particularly in technologically-inclined societies like Malaysia (Walsh, 2022).

The evaluation of Tony Stark's role can also extend to how cultural narratives evolve through the medium of transmedia storytelling. The MCU's strategies in storytelling and characterization exemplify a blend of global themes tailored for diverse audience segments. This strategic approach enables characters like Stark to maintain relevance and resonance over time, fostering sustained engagement through consecutive film releases and associated merchandise that enhances fan involvement. Such multimedia integrations allow audiences not only to witness Stark's character development but also to partake in a wider cultural discourse that includes themes of identity and communal experiences (Walsh, 2022).

Furthermore, the influence of social media cannot be underestimated in analyzing Stark's reach within Malaysian fandoms. Digital platforms facilitate real-time discussions, fan art, and various interpretations of Stark's character, thereby enhancing interpersonal connections among fans. The social aspect of engaging with Stark's character allows for a dynamic exchange of ideas and sentiments that further embeds his character into the cultural fabric of Malaysia. Insight into Stark's dilemmas often leads to significant online discourse that transcends geographical and cultural limitations, allowing international fan communities to find common ground in their shared admiration for this character (Walsh, 2022).

Each of these factors contributes to Tony Stark's prevalent status as a favorite character among Malaysian MCU fans, urging researchers to reflect upon the broader implications of engagement through multimedia narratives. As audiences globally continue to connect with these characters across various platforms, understanding the nuances of these connections becomes paramount. The narrative's complexity, thematic richness, and emotional resonance are integral in forming the frameworks through which characters like Stark are embraced and celebrated, supporting the argument that emotional depth and narrative consistency are universally coveted traits in character design and storytelling within the transmedia context (Walsh, 2022).

In summary, Tony Stark exemplifies a multidimensional character capable of engaging diverse audiences through well-crafted storytelling in the MCU. His evolution parallels broader cultural trends, revealing how

audiences worldwide, including Malaysians, respond to complex narratives that allow for personal identification and emotional investment. By blending themes of heroism, vulnerability, and technological advancement, Stark's character resonates deeply, reinforcing the importance of thoughtful character development in establishing sustained audience engagement. Media entertainment continues to evolve, the understanding of character preferences within different cultural spaces will remain a crucial area of study, highlighting the transformative potential of emotionally engaging narratives across global landscapes.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While the present study offers valuable insights into character engagement within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) among Malaysian fans, several areas need further exploration to deepen scholarly understanding of this phenomenon. First, future research should broaden the scope of character selection beyond Tony Stark, Phil Coulson, and Matt Murdock to include a more diverse range of MCU characters, particularly those representing different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and narrative roles. This would allow researchers to examine whether character engagement varies across demographic lines and to what extent factors such as cultural representation and identity influence audience affinity.

Second, qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, or narrative analysis could complement quantitative findings by uncovering the underlying motivations, emotional triggers, and personal meanings that fans attach to specific characters. Such methods would provide richer and more nuanced insights into the psychological processes behind character identification and parasocial interaction.

Third, longitudinal studies tracking fan engagement over time would be particularly valuable in understanding how audience perceptions evolve in response to changes in character arcs, actor portrayals, or franchise developments. Given the MCU's dynamic nature and ongoing expansion, examining shifts in engagement across different phases of the franchise could reveal patterns of narrative retention and fan loyalty.

Additionally, cross-cultural comparative studies involving fans from different countries or regions could shed light on the role of cultural context in shaping character engagement. By comparing Malaysian audiences with those from other Southeast Asian or Western contexts, scholars could explore how cultural values, media consumption habits, and local interpretations mediate the reception of transnational characters.

Finally, future research should explore the relationship between character engagement and consumer behavior, such as merchandise purchasing, social media interaction, or fan content creation. Understanding how emotional and cognitive investment in characters translates into participatory and economic activities would be beneficial for both academic research and industry applications, particularly in areas of marketing, branding, and fan culture development.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for profit sectors.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by all authors.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

“The authors *declare no conflict of interest*”.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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