Indigenous Dance as a Healing Modality Indigenous Epistemologies

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Abstract

In the Sub-Saharan countries of South Africa and Botswana, indigenous dance is known to transcends social, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realms. Batswana indigenous dance called Mmino wa Setswana or Borankana, when danced on a regular basis alone, with others or imagined, offers a healing and coping mechanism for many indigenous people including the youth and elderly. This paper explores the Setswana indigenous dance and the healing power of dance in the 21st century. The author presents, through using an ethnographic approach, audio and video interviews and maeto (visits, discussions and interviews), how Borankana provides healing and support through dancing. This may be experienced physically or by watching an audience member and through imagination dancing (ID). The concept of dancing in the mind (IID) may be referred to as visualization by some dance teachers and choreographers. It is used by many elderly indigenous Batswana people including people living with disability, who are unable to dance. IID does not require movement, it allows the person to open their mind to imagine themselves dancing and ultimately experience the same feeling as in actual physical movement. This exudes the same psychological and emotional effects for both the dancer moving physically, and the one imagining. There is certainty that dance builds confidence, enhances cognitive ability, supports emotional stability, grows creativity and allows freedom and acceptance of self.

Keywords: African healing, visualization, dance therapy, indigenous imagination dancing, indigenous dance

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Introduction

The contemporary world presents an exhilarating, yet overwhelming and challenging landscape for numerous individuals globally. The reality of a swiftly evolving environment, coupled with the advancements in artificial intelligence, driven by the fourth industrial revolution, necessitates that communities worldwide adapt to these transformations. It is widely acknowledged that change if not universally embraced; can be difficult, and for some, it poses a threat to their established way of life.

Indigenous populations are also contending with the repercussions of a rapidly evolving world, which jeopardizes their history, culture, practices, and beliefs. Consequently, the contributions of scholars and researchers are vital for the preservation of indigenous anthropologies, histories, and cultures.

Indigenous people have historically engaged in practices and rituals that catered for their psychological, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs. These ancient, deeply rooted traditions were integral to their lives, shaping, enabling, and sustaining their rich existence. The Western perspective often reflects a limited view, perception, and observation of indigenous people and their cultures. Historically, the external viewpoint has distorted the authentic narrative surrounding indigenous communities and their cultural practices. At the heart of their existence, lies their indigenous culture, encompassing their methods of healing, which address the body, mind, spirit, and soul. Healing among indigenous people is approached through various means and by diverse gifted individuals. who specialize in distinct healing methodologies, ranging from standard medical care to intricate healing processes that require spiritual intervention and advanced forms of indigenous care.

This study concentrated on the healing practices within the Batswana indigenous community. The Batswana, also known as Tswana, inhabit Botswana as well as the North West, Free State, and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa. The exploration of healing was a component of a broader doctoral research project concerning Batswana indigenous practices in both nations of Botswana and South Africa. Throughout the research, interviews with dance masters, dingaka (traditional healers) and knowledge custodians, along with comprehensive discussions, led to the emergence of the concept of “imagination dancing,” which was notably prevalent among the dance masters, particularly those with extensive experience in dance. Indigenous healing practices have been shaped and guided by indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Indigenous healers, referred to as ngaka/izangoma or shamans, utilize dance as a means to connect with ancestors and spiritual beings for guidance and messages. Additionally, they employ dance to expel illnesses through medicinal songs that possess supernatural efficacy, resonating throughout the cosmos. For the Batswana, healing is articulated in diverse contexts and through various methodologies, including dance (Ntuli, 2009).

The research was carried out through dialogues and interviews with fifteen Batswana dance masters, who were actively teaching and performing or had done so extensively in the past. All participants were Batswana males and females, each with a dancing history exceeding 18 years. A significant number of dance masters have ceased teaching due to the necessity of earning a livelihood, as teaching dance does not provide sufficient income. Instruction in indigenous dance is regarded as a form of community service with individuals who join dance groups not required to pay for these classes; the dancers' dedication is deemed adequate. Currently, dance groups are established for performance purposes and dance competitions, which offer monetary rewards in the form of performance fees or prizes for winning.

In the course of the research, participants were invited to articulate their understanding of dance as perceived by the Batswana. Their responses characterized dance not in terms of movement, but rather as an experience, a spirit, and a connection to the divine. As they elaborated on the significance of dance, they conveyed the essence of dance as a spiritual experience encountered in both dreams and waking moments. These narratives contributed to a broader understanding of the influence and significance of dance in their lives, particularly its therapeutic effects. This inquiry was motivated by a desire to uncover other healing modalities within indigenous cultural practices, such as dance, that enhance the well-being of its practitioners. Through the conducted interviews, the research delves into the perspectives of the indigenous Batswana regarding IID and its role as an unconventional therapeutic and healing approach.

The primary objective of the research was to investigate whether IID could be considered a form of self-hypnosis facilitated by dance, which alters the mind to a state that embodies the experience of a dancer or induces a dance trance. Furthermore, the study sought to determine if indigenous imagination dancing qualifies as dance therapy or a method of visualization.

Literature Review

The existing literature elucidates the concepts of visualization and dance therapy, aiming to ascertain whether IID could serve as an additional modality within these practices. This examination facilitates the identification of both differences and similarities, ultimately leading to a conclusion regarding the classification of this therapeutic approach within the realm of either therapy.

Methodology

This qualitative study was carried out utilizing interview techniques, specifically through semi-structured interviews and survey questions. Semi-structured interviews provide a framework of questions while allowing the flexibility to pose follow-up inquiries based on the responses of the participants. The advantages of conducting interviews include the ability to gather rich, detailed information regarding participants' feelings and thoughts. Furthermore, this method offers the chance to delve into complex issues that may be challenging to address through alternative approaches. Ethnography was employed as a methodological approach for this research, facilitating the capture of Setswana cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions through interviews and survey questions. The second methodological approach utilized in this study was phenomenology. This Phenomenology focuses on comprehending the lived experiences of individuals and deriving meaning from those experiences. The researcher conducted interviews and distributed surveys to seasoned indigenous Setswana dancers and educators who had extensive experience in dance, with many having practiced for over 20 years.

The researcher adopted an interpretive analysis, as the majority of the participants were dance masters, and identified ID as a recurring theme among them. This phenomenon occurs periodically or arises when the participant experiences heightened anxiety, or feelings of being stuck, trapped, or defeated. Some participants equate this to a visionary experience. There was a significant understanding that this phenomenon was perceived by the participants as a gift bestowed by (Modimo le Badimo) God and the ancestors.

Indigenous Imagination Dance

IID refers to the experience of engaging in indigenous dance within the mind, occurring during various states of consciousness, including both wakefulness and sleep. IID manifests unconsciously and emerges spontaneously, devoid of any deliberate planning, preparation, guidance, or structured approach. This phenomenon transpires independently of external influences, instruction, or training. It typically arises when an individual is experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, or depression. Participants consistently expressed a diminished enthusiasm for life, a tendency to withdraw from family and social activities; among the primary contributing factors were unemployment, physical health issues, the loss of loved ones, stress, and a perceived lack of progress. The participants articulated a desire for salvation, release, escape, or redemption. With this information, the author aimed to investigate whether IID is synonymous with visualization or dance therapy and to determine if it serves as a healing modality.

Dance and Healing

The prolonged periods of colonization, oppression and alienation experienced by African populations have resulted in fragmented communities that are disunited, traumatized, fearful, and distrustful of one another. This has led to the emergence of antagonistic African communities both within their homelands and in the diaspora. Nevertheless, in spite of this challenging history, African communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of ongoing adversity. A significant aspect of their survival has been rooted in their indigenous cultural practices, which encompass storytelling, music, dance, drama, art, and other creative expressions. These forms have served as both conscious and subconscious methods of healing. Monteiro and Wall (2011) elucidate how dance within the African diaspora acts as a catalyst for healing and transformation, impacting communities on social, spiritual, mental, and physical levels.

Healing and Imagination

The empirical research substantiating the efficacy of dance, music and art therapy, provides a robust basis for investigating and enhancing healing methodologies that are inspired by imagination. By integrating creativity with findings from neuroscience and psychology, these therapeutic approaches present comprehensive strategies for healing that encompass the mind, body, and spirit (Koch et al., 2019).

There is a thought-provoking question regarding the premise that if imagination is the key to healing, why does not all art possess the capacity to heal? The answer could lie in the relationship between the artist, space and time and audience. The process of creation represents a generous and welcoming act by the artist, aimed at mending the divides that exist within both the creator and the observer. Imagination plays a crucial role in various alternative healing methods, allowing individuals to:

- explore or reshape their identity within a conceptual framework
- experience a sense of freedom and release through the expressive mediums of dance and the arts
- reinterpret negative experiences and imagine positive outcomes
- effectively confront and process pain
- access subconscious emotions and memories that may be challenging to articulate and,
- foster a sense of urgency and control over their healing journey

Visualisation

Visualization holds a crucial and multifaceted role in African cultures, deeply intertwined with spirituality, communal identity, and daily life. It goes beyond simple cognitive processes, serving as a dynamic practice that establishes bonds between individuals and their ancestors, the environment, and the divine. The ensuing discussion explores the importance of visualization for Africans and its function within their cultural context. Fully supported by Stein and Stein (2017) who conclude visualization not merely as a minor technique, but rather as a crucial cognitive and cultural process that is integral to religious, magical, and shamanic practices. From their anthropological perspective, the effectiveness of visualization is assessed not by its objective reality, but by its social and psychological impact — its ability to provide comfort, facilitate healing, offer explanations, exert control, and foster unity among individuals within a common symbolic framework. Visualisation holds the following significance for African people:

A Spiritual Connection

Visualization is commonly viewed as a way to connect with the spiritual realm, encompassing ancestors, deities, and universal energies. It serves as a channel for meditation, prayer, and ceremonial practices, enabling individuals to rise above the physical realm and receive insights or blessings. For instance, in numerous African cultural traditions, visualization is employed in rituals to summon the presence of ancestors or spirits, forming a mental image of their guidance and support (Mndende, 2018).

A Process of Healing

Visualization is a fundamental aspect of traditional healing methods. Healers, shamans or medicine practitioners utilize mental imagery to identify ailments, direct healing energies, or eliminate spiritual barriers. For example, in South African Zulu traditions, sangomas (healers) may visualize the flow of energy (umoya) within a patient's body to restore equilibrium and health. Mlisa (2019) confirms this in his study about a sangoma’s method of healing using visualisation and dreams.

A Method of Storytelling and Cultural Preservation

Visualization is vital in oral traditions, where storytellers employ vivid imagery to animate myths, legends, and historical narratives. This practice safeguards cultural wisdom and moral lessons for future generations. As an illustration: Griots in West Africa, utilize visualization to narrate grand tales, allowing audiences to “see” the stories in their minds and forge an emotional connection with their cultural heritage.

A Path to Manifestation and Altered States

Visualization is often associated with the belief in the influence of thought and intention in shaping reality. By envisioning desired outcomes, individuals align with creative forces to realize their aspirations. By concentrating deeply on mental imagery - such as a journey, a spirit animal, or a cosmic landscape - the shaman or participant in the ritual is able to transform his/her consciousness. This imagined journey is regarded not merely as "imagination" but as a genuine spiritual expedition into a non-ordinary reality, where participants can engage with spirits, acquire wisdom, or recover souls (Stein & Stein, 2017).

In conclusion, visualization is integral to rites of passage, including birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Participants engage in mental imagery to connect with ancestral spirits, seek blessings, or signify transition. It is significant to the cultural ritual and ceremonies that are part of the cultural practices. This explanation is thoroughly argued by the Asante (1987) theory of Afrocentricy, which highlights that visualisation is not an accidental practice but a logical expression of how culture, healing and spirituality is viewed by Africans.

Dance Therapy

Dance therapy, also known as dance/movement therapy (DMT), is a form of expressive therapy that utilizes movement and dance to promote emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration. This therapeutic method is based on the premise that the mind and body are fundamentally interconnected, suggesting that movement acts as a vital tool for healing and self-expression. The leading professional association, the American Dance Therapy Association, defines dance therapy as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual" (American Dance Therapy Association, 2024). Guan (2023) explains dance therapy as a therapeutic method that employs movement to assist individuals in achieving emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration. It is conducted by trained dance therapists, who guide participants in utilizing movement to convey emotions, process trauma, and enhance overall well-being (Guan, 2023).

There are many types of DMTs that are used as part of treatment support, amongst them are authentic, psychiatric or clinical developmental, trauma- informed, medical and clinical dance therapies.

Types of Dance Therapy

Authentic Movement Therapy

Developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse - this is a modality of dance therapy, where individuals partake in spontaneous movement driven by internal impulses, usually with their eyes closed, while a witness observes and provides feedback. The aim is to access the subconscious through movement in order to connect the body with the ego (Adler, 2002; Whitehouse, 1999).

Developmental Dance Therapy

This targets children and individuals with developmental disabilities, fostering improvements in motor skills, communication abilities, and social interactions. This methodology is significantly shaped by the contributions of Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff. Practitioners employ the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Bartenieff Fundamentals™ as a basis for evaluating a client's movement behaviours. The therapeutic process is grounded in the idea that human growth adheres to a progressive motor sequence (for instance, yielding, pushing, reaching, grasping). By tackling interruptions in these foundational developmental sequences through movement, it is aimed to facilitate both psychological and physical integration (Payne, 2017).

Trauma-Informed Dance Therapy

This is designed to aid in the processing and healing of trauma through intentional movement and increased body awareness.

Clinical DMT or Psychiatric DMT

This is utilized in psychiatric hospitals, clinics, and private practices to address mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, and eating disorders (Koch et al., 2019).

The above therapies showcase the importance of DMT as a support therapy for patients, it is a known fact and a growing field in research that the combination mind-body-movement play a major role in facilitating healing and wellbeing.

Imagination

Imagination is a fundamental human capability that allows the mind to generate ideas, images, and thoughts about various subjects, thereby fostering creativity and comprehension. Its interpretation and significance can vary greatly across different cultures and philosophical traditions. Eurocentric definitions of imagination differ from those in African contexts; the Western tradition has predominantly characterized imagination as an individual, creative force that enables the human subject to transform or escape the world through art and thought (Kearney, 2021). This conception of imagination is often viewed as an internal mental process, encompassing Aristotelian, romantic, and psychological perspectives. In contrast, the African perspective, particularly from Southern Africa, defines imagination in the following manner:

Ubuntu Perspective

The ubuntu perspective, prevalent in Southern Africa, regards imagination as a collective and relational capacity that empowers individuals to envision a harmonious and interconnected existence. It is closely associated with empathy, narrative creation, and the overall well-being of the community. Its importance lies in fostering social unity, ethical responsibility, and the preservation of cultural heritage through oral traditions and communal storytelling (Metz, 2017).

Ancestral Connection

The ancestral connection perspective, found in parts of West Africa, views imagination as a spiritual and ancestral gift that enables communication across temporal boundaries — encompassing the past, present, and future. It acts as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, facilitating visions, dreams, and creative expressions. Imagination serves as a means to honour ancestors, interpret divine messages, and maintain cultural continuity through rituals, artistic endeavours, and storytelling.

Creative Energy or Vital Force

The creative vital force perspective, primarily observed in Central and East Africa, perceives imagination as a manifestation of the life force (Seriti or Chi) that exists within all living beings. It represents the ability to shape reality through thought, intention, and creativity, in harmony with both natural and cosmic principles.

Comparative Insights

Eurocentric interpretations often highlight imagination as a personal, cognitive, or artistic ability, rooted in philosophical and scientific contexts. In contrast, African perspectives on imagination are typically characterized as collective, spiritual, and relational, intricately linked to cultural identity, ancestral knowledge, and the environment. While both viewpoints underscoring the transformative power of imagination, they diverge in their emphasis - Eurocentric frameworks tend to focus on individual creativity and rational thought, whereas African frameworks highlight communal welfare and spiritual ties. Collectively, these perspectives provide a comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of this fundamental human trait.

The Findings

IID

The phenomenon of IID can be characterized as a psychological and semi-physical condition experienced by individuals, who find themselves engaged in an imagined dance scenario during sleep or in a hypnagogic state. This state is not facilitated by another individual nor is it the result of any form of training; rather, it occurs spontaneously and unintentionally. The individuals envision themselves dancing - actually performing, expressing, emoting, and exhibiting heightened respiration. This process unfolds automatically, involuntarily, and unsolicited while in bed. Participants report awakening with heavy breathing, perspiration, and disarranged bedding, with some even finding themselves partially off the bed. Given that all participants were navigating, particularly challenging periods in their lives, marked by extreme stress, anxiety, depression, illness, and despair, these occurrences appeared to resemble a form of ritual. It seemed as though their ancestors were visiting them, utilizing the gift of dance to assist, heal, and guide them through their current life circumstances.

All participants articulated their experiences of IID as transcendental and uniquely personal, noting that they felt and appeared different afterwards. Some reported that others perceived them as looking younger and more vibrant. This phenomenon often occurs in environments, where movement is restricted or impossible (such as hospitals) or when individuals seek to escape their present reality. It arises when individuals attempt to soothe themselves, build their resilience, or become lost in the act of dancing, ultimately leading to healing.

Emerging Themes

The findings from the study on IID were encapsulated in several prominent themes identified by the participants, which included the following:

A Lightened Spirit and an Immediate Sense of Relief and Joy

All participants conveyed a sensation of renewal and an uplifting of their spirits, describing the removal of a dark cloud or oppressive energy that had previously enveloped them, enabling them to experience joy in life, home, and well-being.

A Revived and Renewed Enthusiasm for Life

The participants expressed a newfound happiness in being alive and a desire to continue living, with some indicating that they felt they were on a path toward recovery. The sensation of joy in being alive and a desire to continue living was expressed by some participants, who conveyed a belief that they were on a trajectory towards death. They felt as though they were dying internally, leading their bodies to inevitably follow suit. They struggled to comprehend their feelings, yet they accepted their current existence, contrasting sharply with a profound disconnection from the act of living.

An Increase in Self-Confidence

Participants articulated a return to their new selves, filled with excitement about the future; they began to discuss upcoming possibilities rather than awaiting death.

A Liberation From the Negative Feelings of Defeat

Three participants, who had previously attempted suicide, described their existence as one of depression. These individuals indicated that 84% of the participants shared similar sentiments.

An Optimistic Outlook on Life

All participants began to formulate plans for the future, engaging in household responsibilities, reconnecting with loved ones, and showing interest in their family members' lives. They attended church, participated in funerals, and rejoined cultural clubs they had once belonged to. Some reported that they started to leave their bedrooms, shedding the shame that had confined them.

An Enhanced Sense of Vitality

All participants commenced taking better care of themselves, with many noting a decline in their overall health and hygiene, which they had previously neglected.

A General Resurgence of Energy

All participants felt as though they had received a direct gift from God and their ancestors, with some describing themselves as feeling powerful and chosen.

A Sensation of Healing

70% of participants reported experiencing a sense of tranquillity in their spirits, bodies, and minds. Everything appeared clear and organized, as it ought to be. This reflects a physical and mental rejuvenation of their bodies and minds. Participants recovering from illnesses and accidents noted a considerable enhancement in their recovery process.

A Persistent Belief of Second Chances/Next Life

13 out of 15 participants conveyed a feeling of accountability and clarity regarding their roles in the world, particularly in relation to their families and communities.

The participants' descriptions of their ID resembled a vision or a higher spiritual experience. Some articulated it as transcending the natural realm and entering different dimensions, where they were guided to dance. This ritual represented a transition to a higher level of existence, a rite of passage in their lives. This occurrence was not merely a dream; it was perceived as God and the ancestors reassuring them, as if they had paid their dues through suffering, thus earning their place and the next phase of their lives.

Table 1

Explanation of the Difference Between IDD and Visualization

Indigenous Imagination Dancing	**Visualisation**
It is self-induced or triggered by an event / happening	It is normally guided by a teacher of trainer
It is used to self-heal	It is used to measure improvement in specific technique
The person feel physically and emotionally better (the psyche and soma is healed)	The dancer feels the movement and the actions targeted are increased
It has a long span of staying healing properties	Its impact can be short lived therefore would need to be practiced all the time
It is personal and not often shared with anyone	It can be measured as the teacher or trainer would see a visible improvement
It can be in an awake state or in a sleep dream state	It is practiced during the day as part of dance training to improve technical aspects
It is not often talked about	It is known as a teaching and healing practise

Table 2

Explanation of the Differences Between DMT and IID

Dance Movement Therapy	**Indigenous Imagination Dancing**
Is supervised by a therapist	Occurs alone without any witnesses
Is a well-established form of psychotherapy	Has not been researched and is difficult to measure
Is a practiced and successful therapy	Is unknown and currently experienced by indigenous Batswana dance masters
Is for all ages, children to the elderly	Is known to be used by indigenous Batswana adult dance masters
Has a personal significance	Has a spiritual and cultural significance

There were more similarities found than differences between DMT and IID, as both therapies are aimed at improving the general well-being of individuals. The standout difference is that IID is not supervised by a therapist. The following were similarities:

- both have healing and therapeutic results for the person
- both release endorphins, enhancing a feeling of buoyancy and joy
- both have positive psychological effects, changing the state of body as a result of therapy (depression, PTSD, general dissatisfaction)
- improves general well-being of individuals

Conclusion

The analysis of visualisation, DMT and IID, revealed that all shared characteristics and distinct differences that set them apart. The fundamental fact that IID functions independently of third-party oversight and occurs in isolation, complicates the measurement process, particularly in the absence of a witness to validate the variations. In IID, the therapeutic outcomes manifest randomly, making their effects more discernible over time rather than being immediately noticeable. There are significant similarities among visualization, DMT and imagination. The benefits encompass a reduction in anxiety and stress, an improvement in mood, a decrease in levels of depression, and an enhancement in confidence, self-esteem, and a positive body image. All these modalities promote emotional expression through dance while concurrently allowing the body to release accumulated trauma.

This research faced particular limitations as it was exclusively conducted among Batswana men and women, who were both dancers and instructors. Although the participants were proficient dance masters, their numbers were limited, considering that there are relatively few dance masters, many of whom have unfortunately passed away. The study did not encompass individuals who are non-dancers, despite the fact that all Batswana may have been exposed to dance and music throughout their lives. This raises the question of whether IID is also experienced by non-dancers. Furthermore, the authors, a Motswana woman and a man, who respectively are a dancer and an educator, may have introduced a degree of bias, as their perspective was inherently favourable towards Batswana culture. Nonetheless, it can be argued that an emic perspective and narrative of indigenous peoples and cultures hold greater significance than a narrative from an outsider.

The research further highlights the phenomenon of indigenous ID as a healing modality, which all participants had previously been unaware of collectively experiencing. This also emphasizes the intricate healing practices that indigenous peoples possess, many of which remain undocumented, and some of which may never be recorded or tested. Nonetheless, these practices continue to offer protection and healing to numerous gifted individuals within the African indigenous communities. As the world progresses and cultures evolve, certain events will transpire that will remain unknown and sacred to indigenous communities. The indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing and existing, will perpetually manifest through dreams, storytelling, art, dance, and music. This illustrates the power of Africans to quietly preserve their culture.

The study concludes with the assertion that IID serves as a healing modality and a form of visualization, even though it occurs subconsciously; it cannot be planned, does not inhibit imagination, and possesses potent power. IID is a type of dance movement therapy, akin to other imagination-focused therapies, and it holds significant potential for enhancing healing and overall well-being, particularly in psychological, emotional, cognitive, and social aspects. As research in this domain advances, there is a likelihood that these methodologies will be increasingly integrated into conventional healthcare, offering creative and comprehensive solutions for both individuals and communities in the future.

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conveyed as it was, along with the intention to share, preserve, and protect indigenous knowledge.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that the manuscript is originally written and only made use of ahrefs sentence rewrite tool for improving language. The author further decares that apart from ahrefs, no other AI or AI assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript.

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