

## **A Rhetorical Analysis of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* From the Perspective of Triangle Theory**

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### **Abstract**

This scholarly article provides a rhetorical analysis of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024) through Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, which consists of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. The study aims to investigate how the film employs rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences emotionally, ethically, and logically. The narrative of the film addresses themes of elderly care, intergenerational family relations, and filial piety in contemporary Thai-Chinese society. It not only reflects Thailand's transition into an aging society but also functions rhetorically to foster cross-cultural understanding. Findings reveal that the film employs Ethos by presenting the grandmother as a morally credible figure and authentically portraying Thai-Chinese cultural values; Pathos through emotionally charged depictions of illness, death, and intergenerational care; and Logos by constructing a coherent storyline, symbolic mise-en-scène, cinematic arts, and logical connections to broader social issues. This study concludes that the film serves not only as a family melodrama but also as a rhetorical text that shapes perception, emotion, and values within global society. Lahn Mah is indeed a good and compelling movie worth watching.

*Keywords:* rhetorical triangle, ethos, pathos, logos, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*

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## Introduction

In the past decade, film studies has evolved beyond the study of cinema as an aesthetic or cultural artifact toward a rhetorical perspective that investigates how films persuade and construct meaning through image, sound, and performance (Nichols & Baron, 2024). This theoretical shift has positioned film as a rhetorical text—not merely a narrative medium but a site of value formation and ideological persuasion (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980).

Within this framework, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*, known in Thai as *Lahn Mah*, directed by Pat Boonitipat, provides a compelling case study of emotional and moral persuasion in contemporary Thai cinema. The film explores intergenerational relationships within a Thai–Chinese family, centering on themes of inheritance and filial piety while critically interrogating consumerist morality (Variety, 2025). Its critical and commercial success across Asia has been attributed to its capacity to generate shared emotional resonance, transcending national and linguistic boundaries.

To investigate this persuasive dynamic, the present article applies Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle Theory, which consists of Ethos (speaker’s or storyteller’s credibility), Pathos (emotional and value appeal), and Logos (logic and reasoning) (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007; Tan, 2013). The adoption of this framework is justified for two primary reasons. First, Aristotle’s rhetorical model remains foundational in both strategic and entertainment communication (Foss, 2017; Heath & Bryant, 2000). Second, the film’s moral tension between self-interest and familial affection allows a systematic examination of how emotional, logical, and ethical appeals interact in cinematic persuasion.

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are followings (1) to articulate the theoretical framework of rhetorical triangle theory; (2) to analyze the film’s use of persuasive strategies in terms of Ethos; (3) Pathos; (4) and Logos; and (5) to synthesize the interaction among these appeals in constructing the film’s rhetorical force. Ultimately, the study argues that *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* exemplifies integrated persuasive storytelling, uniting emotion, reason, and moral value to produce an affective yet intellectually coherent cinematic discourse within contemporary Thai cultural context.

### Theoretical Framework: The Rhetorical Triangle

Although the rhetorical triangle emerged from classical philosophy, it has undergone significant reinterpretation in contemporary rhetorical and media theory. Scholars such as Burke (1969), Foss (2017), and Tan (2013) have expanded the Aristotelian model beyond verbal discourse to encompass visual, multimodal, and mediated communication. This expansion reflects a paradigm shift wherein rhetoric is no longer confined to speech or writing but is understood as symbolic action (Burke, 1969) manifest across all forms of cultural expression—including cinema.

In the domain of film studies, this reconceptualization has given rise to visual and cinematic rhetoric, emphasizing how moving images, sound, editing, and mise-en-scène perform persuasive functions comparable to verbal arguments (Messaris, 1997; Nichols & Baron, 2024). Within this framework, the rhetorical triangle can be mapped onto three key components of cinematic communication:

1. Speaker/Author – the filmmaker or authorial entity who constructs the rhetorical stance and voice of the film;

2. Audience – the viewer who interprets, empathizes, and responds to the film’s appeals; and
3. Text/Message – the cinematic narrative itself, composed of visual, auditory, and symbolic codes that convey meaning.

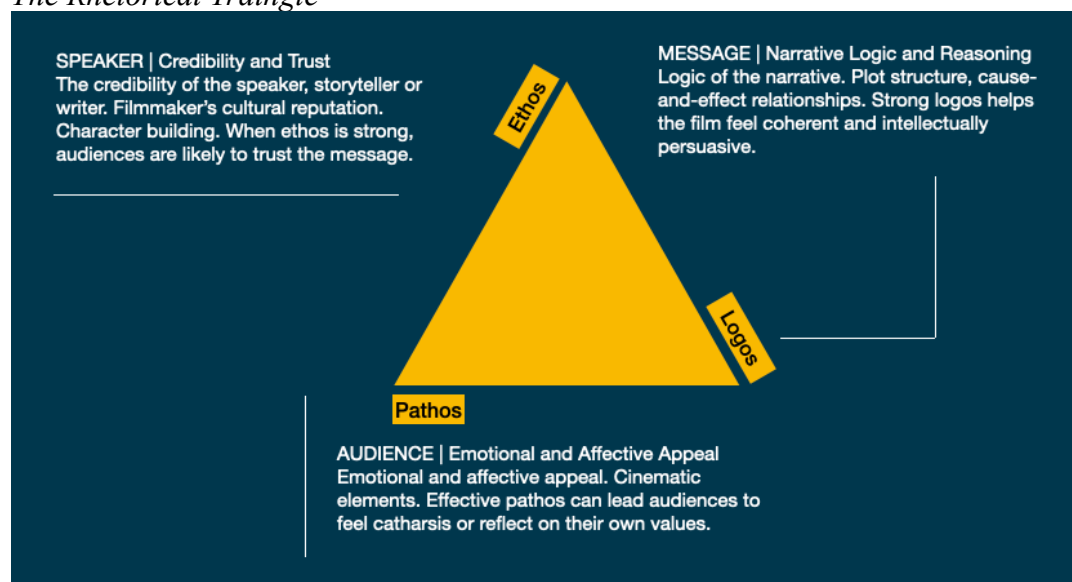
This triadic relation transforms film into a discursive arena where meanings are negotiated rather than passively received (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980). Hence, cinematic rhetoric situates the audience as a co-producer of meaning within a communicative system shaped by emotional, ethical, and logical appeals.

### Components of the Rhetorical Triangle: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

A rigorous rhetorical analysis requires close attention to the interaction among Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, each serving distinct yet interdependent persuasive functions.

**Figure 1**

#### *The Rhetorical Triangle*



- **Ethos: The credibility of the speaker or storyteller.**  
Ethos refers to the perceived integrity, moral authority, and expertise of the communicator (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007). In film, *ethos* manifests through both narrative and extratextual cues: the reliability of the narrator, the moral framing of characters, and the cultural reputation of the filmmaker (Nichols & Baron, 2024). Establishing ethos allows the film to claim authenticity and legitimacy, enhancing the viewer’s willingness to be persuaded.
- **Pathos: Motional and Affective Appeal.**  
Pathos engages the emotions and values of the audience through strategies of empathy, sentiment, and aesthetic affect (Foss, 2017; Tan, 2013). In cinematic terms, pathos operates through *mise-en-scène*, music, lighting, and pacing—elements that evoke emotional identification with characters and situations. Films employing strong pathos often elicit catharsis and moral reflection, transforming affect into persuasion.
- **Logos: Logical Structure and Reasoned Argument.**  
Logos pertains to the rational organization of the message—its narrative coherence, causal logic, and argumentative clarity (Heath & Bryant, 2000). In filmic rhetoric, logos

emerges through structured plotlines, moral dilemmas, and narrative resolutions that embody reasoned conclusions. A well-developed *logos* enables audiences to accept moral propositions intellectually, not merely emotionally.

Together, these appeals constitute a dialectical system in which *Ethos* provides credibility, *Pathos* supplies emotional force, and *Logos* ensures rational grounding. The persuasive power of a film depends on the dynamic balance among the three—a balance that determines its capacity to move audiences ethically, emotionally, and cognitively.

### **Application of Rhetorical Theory to Film Analysis**

Contemporary rhetorical criticism recognizes film as not merely an artistic form but a communicative act embedded in social discourse (Foss, 2017; Nichols & Baron, 2024). Applying the rhetorical triangle to film analysis enables scholars to explore how filmmakers (speakers) strategically design cinematic messages (texts) to evoke responses from audiences through the integrated use of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

In the context of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*, this framework provides a systematic lens to examine how the film:

- Constructs *Ethos* through credible character development and culturally authentic storytelling;
- Mobilizes *Pathos* through emotionally charged imagery, dialogue, and soundscapes that evoke empathy and filial sentiment; and
- Reinforces *Logos* through coherent moral reasoning and narrative logic that justifies its ethical message.

By analyzing these dimensions, the present study positions the film as a representative case of cinematic rhetoric—a form of persuasive storytelling in which emotional affect, ethical credibility, and logical coherence converge to produce a unified rhetorical experience.

### **Ethos Analysis**

#### **Character Credibility and Narrative Transformation**

The protagonist, M, begins as an unmotivated young man—unemployed, aspired video game streamer, and financially dependent on his grandmother, Mengju. At the film's outset, his *Ethos* is deliberately fragile: he embodies the moral ambivalence of a generation torn between consumerist ambition and familial obligation. However, the narrative arc gradually reconstructs his *Ethos* through experiential redemption. As M assumes caretaking responsibility for his terminally ill grandmother, he undergoes a moral transformation that restores his credibility as a compassionate and dutiful descendant (Tan, 2013; Variety, 2025).

This transformation is achieved through cinematic techniques that reinforce his sincerity: long-take close-ups capture moments of vulnerability, ambient soundscapes foreground domestic silence and labor, and dialogue emphasizes growth from greed to gratitude. These strategies align with what Foss (2017) calls *ethos through performance*, where ethical credibility is embodied rather than asserted. By the final act, M's moral conversion is not stated explicitly but rendered visually through his selfless care, culminating in a non-verbal expression of virtue that invites audience trust.

## **Cultural and Authorial Ethos**

Beyond the characters, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* constructs Ethos through its cultural authenticity and authorial positioning. Director Pat Boonitipat's background in Thai-Chinese storytelling and television drama imbues the film with a voice that is both personal and communal. The film's depiction of the Thai-Chinese diasporic experience—family businesses, ancestral rituals, and the symbolic economy of filial piety—enhances its cultural credibility (Nichols & Baron, 2024).

The mise-en-scène of Bangkok's Talad Phlu district, combined with the use of Teochew, or Chaozhou, dialect and traditional funerary rituals, signifies a commitment to representational accuracy and ethical fidelity to real-life Thai-Chinese culture. This corresponds to what Messaris (1997) terms visual ethos, where authentic representation functions as a rhetorical resource that reinforces trust between filmmaker and audience.

Furthermore, the director's intentional avoidance of melodramatic excess positions the film within a moral aesthetic that values empathy over sentimentality—a strategy consistent with ethical realism in contemporary Asian cinema (Tan, 2013). Such aesthetic discipline constructs an Ethos of integrity and modesty, anchoring the film's pathos and logos within a framework of ethical sincerity.

## **The Function of Ethos in Cinematic Persuasion**

Ethos in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* operates as the foundational axis upon which emotional and logical appeals are stabilized. The audience's emotional identification (Pathos) depends on their trust in the film's moral voice, while their acceptance of its ethical argument (Logos) relies on the credibility of its narrative ethos. Through its integration of character transformation, cultural authenticity, and ethical aesthetics, the film achieves what Burke (1969) calls rhetorical identification—a state in which audiences perceive themselves as morally aligned with the story's values. Consequently, Ethos in this film is not merely a device of character trustworthiness but a structural principle that binds the film's rhetorical triangle. It legitimizes the emotions evoked and the arguments advanced, transforming the film into a moral narrative that persuades through ethical presence as much as through emotional and logical force.

**Table 1**

*Levels of Ethos, Corresponding Rhetorical Strategies, and Their Persuasive Effects on Audiences*

<b>Level of Ethos</b>	<b>Rhetorical Strategies</b>	<b>Persuasive Effects on the Audience</b>
Character Ethos: Grandma	Embodiment of moral virtue, perseverance, and self-sacrifice	Cultivates respect and trust, thereby reinforcing the audience's acceptance of filial values
Character Ethos: M	Depiction of moral growth and ethical transformation	Enables audience identification, fostering cognitive and moral alignment with the film's message
Cultural Ethos (Thai-Chinese)	Integration of ritual practices, traditional cuisine, domestic spatial design, and bilingual linguistic expression	Enhances cultural authenticity, strengthening the perceived credibility of the narrative
Social Ethos (Aging Society)	Representation of eldercare challenges and intergenerational familial obligations	Increases sociocultural relevance, heightening the persuasive force of the film's thematic claims

### **Pathos Analysis**

#### **Emotional Architecture and Familial Identification**

*How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* constructs its Pathos primarily through the representation of intergenerational intimacy and vulnerability. The emotional core of the film emerges from the caregiving relationship between M and his terminally ill grandmother. Through an extended observational style—featuring long takes, close-ups, and minimalistic dialogue—the film enables the viewer to inhabit intimate family spaces, fostering a sense of shared presence and emotional proximity (Messaris, 1997).

Several techniques contribute to this emotional architecture:

- 1. Slow-paced, contemplative scenes**

The film frequently employs unhurried temporal rhythms, creating emotional immersion. This aligns with Tan's (2013) notion that lingering temporalities in film produce empathetic absorption, enabling the audience to dwell on characters' emotional states.

- 2. Embodied performances**

Ama's physical decline—rendered through subtle gestures, labored breathing, and bodily stillness—functions as what Nichols and Baron (2024) describes as affective evidence, where the body itself becomes a rhetorical site of emotional truth.

- 3. Dialogues grounded in everyday tenderness**

Simple exchanges “*Have you eaten?*”, “*Don't stay up too late.*” carry the weight of intergenerational affection. Their ordinariness reinforces authenticity, creating what

Foss (2017) terms symbolic convergence, where shared cultural scripts evoke collective memory and empathy.

#### 4. **Emotional mirroring**

M's gradual shift from indifference to care is mirrored by the audience, creating a parallel emotional journey. This rhetorical alignment fosters what Burke (1969) calls identification, the affective merging of audience and character values.

Through these techniques, the film crafts a coherent emotional universe that invites viewers into a culturally familiar yet deeply personal narrative of familial duty and impending loss.

### **Cultural Emotion as Rhetorical Resource**

Pathos in the film is inseparable from its Thai–Chinese cultural context, which provides an emotional vocabulary shared by much of its regional audience. The film strategically employs culturally resonant symbols—ancestral altars, funerary rituals, herbal medicine, and the vernacular domestic environment of Talad Phlu. These iconic elements activate what Bordwell (2006) terms culturally encoded affect, emotions embedded in shared social experiences and traditions.

Key cultural-emotional mechanisms include:

- **Filial Piety**  
The moral weight of caring for one's elders is not simply a narrative theme but an emotional imperative. The film leverages this culturally recognized duty to intensify audience empathy and guilt, generating what Heath and Bryant (2000) call value-laden affective appeals.
- **Collective nostalgia**  
The depiction of old neighborhoods, childhood rituals, and family meals evokes nostalgia as an emotional connector across generations—serving as an affective bridge that reinforces identification.
- **Emotional silence as a cultural code**  
Thai–Chinese families often express love through action rather than verbalization. The film's understated tone, quiet suffering, and unspoken affection resonate with culturally specific emotional registers.

These cultural codes amplify the film's affective power, making the emotional experience not only personal but socially shared—a crucial mechanism for persuasive cinema in Asian cultural contexts.

### **Pathos and the Ethics of Suffering**

A central dimension of Pathos in the film is its ethical portrayal of suffering. Ama's terminal illness is depicted with restraint—avoiding sensationalism or excessive sentimentality. This aligns with ethical cinematic principles articulated by Nichols and Baron (2024), which emphasize dignified suffering as a moral form of emotional persuasion.

The ethical significance is twofold:

1. **Humanization without exploitation**  
Grandma's vulnerability is shown through empathy rather than pity. Her moments of strength—humor, stubbornness, practicality—preserve her dignity, preventing the film from lapsing into melodramatic manipulation.

## 2. Emotional responsibility

The film distributes emotional weight across the narrative, allowing audiences to process grief gradually. This pacing corresponds with Tan's (2013) concept of *regulated emotionality*, which promotes reflection rather than shock.

By aligning emotional portrayal with ethical restraint, the film enhances the credibility of its emotional appeals, allowing Pathos to reinforce Ethos rather than undermine it—an important synergy in the rhetorical triangle.

### The Function of Pathos in Persuasive Storytelling

Ultimately, Pathos serves as the driving force of the film's rhetorical impact. Through emotional immersion, cultural resonance, and ethical sensitivity, the film constructs an affective environment that shapes audience interpretation. In line with Foss's (2017) view that emotional engagement facilitates the internalization of rhetorical messages, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* uses Pathos to guide viewers toward reflection on moral responsibility, intergenerational care, and the value of time. Thus, Pathos in the film is not merely sentimental. It is structurally embedded—an intentional rhetorical strategy that transforms emotional experience into ethical persuasion.

**Table 2**

*Types of Pathos, Rhetorical Techniques, Cinematic Instances, and Their Effects on Audiences*

Type of Pathos	Techniques	Illustrative Examples from the Film	Audience Effects
Narrative Pathos	Character transformation as an emotional driver	M's shift from pursuing inheritance to genuinely caring for his grandmother	Evokes poignancy and deepens recognition of the value of familial relationships
Cinematic Pathos	Use of camera framing, color palette, and musical scoring	Warm-toned domestic scenes; melancholic piano motifs	Stimulates emotional resonance and activates personal or nostalgic memory recall
Symbolic Pathos	Employment of culturally embedded objects and rituals	Domestic space, traditional foods, Qingming ancestral rites	Fosters culturally grounded emotional engagement and reinforces shared moral sentiments

### Logos Analysis

#### Narrative Causality and Moral Reasoning

*How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* constructs Logos through a tightly woven causal narrative centered on intergenerational responsibility, inheritance, and moral awakening. The film's core premise—M's decision to care for his terminally ill grandmother in the hope of

receiving her inheritance—creates an explicit ethical dilemma that structures the film’s reasoning. Key narrative mechanisms include:

1. Cause–effect progression: M’s initial motivation (inheritance) logically drives the plot, producing conflict with siblings, tension with family expectations, and internal conflict about his morality. Each narrative beat follows a clear causal chain, allowing the moral development to appear earned rather than imposed (Bordwell, 2006).
2. Character motivation: Early scenes emphasize M’s immaturity and economic struggle, providing rational justification for his morally dubious incentives. As his motivations transform, the film maintains logical continuity, allowing viewers to recognize the coherence of his ethical growth (Tan, 2013).
3. Revelation as narrative logic: The discovery of Mengju’s long-held savings in M’s name functions as a logical pivot—reshaping the ethical equation not by emotional manipulation but by reconfiguring narrative information. This aligns with Foss’s (2017) view that persuasive narratives often rely on information restructuring as a logical strategy.

Through these strategies, the film presents its moral argument—that genuine care transcends material incentive—in a logically traceable manner.

### **Symbolic and Moral Reasoning**

In addition to causal logic, the film employs symbolic Logos, where objects, settings, and rituals serve as evidence within the moral argument:

- **The old family house** symbolizes continuity and memory, providing justification for filial obligation.
- **Funeral rituals** contextualize death within communal ethics, integrating cultural logic into the narrative.
- **Everyday caregiving actions**—cooking, cleaning, feeding—operate as concrete behavioral proofs of moral transformation.

This symbolic reasoning echoes Burke’s (1969) notion of symbolic action, wherein symbols function as argumentative devices in themselves.

### **Logical Resolution and Ethical Coherence**

The film’s conclusion embodies rational closure, where narrative outcomes align with the thematic thesis. Mengju’s passing, M’s transformation, and the ambivalent but meaningful reconciliation among family members provide a resolution that satisfies the film’s moral logic without resorting to didacticism.

This structure reflects Heath and Bryant’s (2000) model of narrative persuasion, in which the audience internalizes an argument when:

1. narrative coherence (logical flow),
2. narrative fidelity (believability), and
3. moral plausibility

are simultaneously met.

By maintaining coherence in motivation, causality, and symbolic reasoning, the film delivers a moral conclusion supported by Logos as much as by Pathos.

## The Function of Logos in the Film's Persuasive System

Logos in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* bolsters the persuasive power of Ethos and Pathos by supplying: structural stability, ethical justification, narrative plausibility, and conceptual clarity. It ensures that emotional appeals are not arbitrary but grounded in a reasoned portrayal of family ethics, caregiving labor, and moral responsibility. The film's success, therefore, arises not only from the emotional intensity of its Pathos but from the rational architecture that makes those emotions meaningful. Thus, Logos functions as the intellectual backbone of the film's rhetorical triangle, transforming emotional experience into moral comprehension.

**Table 3**

*Symbolic Elements, Their Logical Meanings, and Rhetorical Functions*

Symbolic Element	Logical Interpretation	Rhetorical Function
Grandmother's House	Repository of memory, lineage, and emotional stability	Conveys the idea that the home functions as the central locus of emotional and rational grounding
Dining Table	Familial connection and shared relational space	Establishes the implicit logic that communal eating signifies relational bonding and unity
Ancestral Graves	Intergenerational continuity and cultural lineage	Reinforces the audience's belief in the significance of ancestral remembrance and filial obligations
Old Photographs	Tangible evidence of past realities and lived experiences	Serves as documentary proof that strengthens the film's Ethos and supports its Logos-based reasoning

## Conclusion

This study has examined *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* through the lens of the Aristotelian Rhetorical Triangle—Ethos, Pathos, and Logos—to understand how the film constructs persuasive meaning within the context of Thai–Chinese familial ethics and contemporary cinematic storytelling. The analysis demonstrates that the film's rhetorical power emerges not from any single element but from the integrated interplay among credibility, emotion, and reason.

First, Ethos operates as the film's moral foundation. Through credible character development, culturally authentic representation, and the ethical stance of the filmmaker, the film constructs a trustworthy moral voice (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007; Tan, 2013). The transformation of M, the dignified portrayal of Ama, and the authenticity of Thai–Chinese domestic life collectively establish a persuasive ethical framework that legitimizes the film's thematic message.

Second, Pathos functions as the film's affective engine. The emotional architecture of the narrative—embodied suffering, intergenerational intimacy, and culturally encoded sentiment—mobilizes empathy and identification (Nichols & Baron 2024; Tan, 2013). The film's ability to evoke regional resonance across Asian audiences is rooted in its affective fidelity to shared cultural values, such as filial piety and everyday acts of care.

Third, Logos provides structural coherence to the film's persuasive discourse. Through causal narrative progression, morally justified character motivations, and symbolic reasoning, the film constructs a logically grounded moral argument: that genuine care transcends material inheritance (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980). This rational architecture stabilizes the emotional appeal and transforms sentiment into ethical insight.

Taken together, Ethos, Pathos, and Logos interact dynamically to form a holistic persuasive system. The film exemplifies what Foss (2017) terms integrated rhetorical storytelling, wherein emotional resonance, ethical credibility, and logical coherence converge to produce deep moral reflection. As a result, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* stands not only as a powerful family drama but also as a case study in cinematic rhetoric—demonstrating how film can function as a site of cultural persuasion, ethical inquiry, and intergenerational dialogue.

Thus, this analysis affirms that the film's impact lies in its ability to convert intimate experience into universal ethical reflection, positioning it as an important contribution to contemporary Southeast Asian cinema and to the broader study of filmic persuasion in global media culture.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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