

The Power of Language: Exploring the Impact of Communication on Mental Health and Wellbeing of University Students

Nicholas Isaac Mukwana, Kyambogo University, Uganda
Sarah Nabiccu, Kyambogo University, Uganda

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Abstract

Language is a fundamental component of human communication, with profound implications for mental health and interpersonal relationships. This study examined the complex relationship between language use, mental well-being, and social interactions, emphasizing how language can either foster connection or cause harm. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data from 177 respondents. The study explored the prevalence of rude speech, the emotional consequences of such communication, and the principles guiding effective and empathetic language use. Findings revealed that a substantial majority of participants admitted to having spoken rudely to others at some point. The emotional aftermath of rude communication was commonly associated with guilt, remorse, and regret, underscoring the psychological impact of language choices. Additionally, six key themes emerged as guiding principles for empathetic communication: mindfulness and self-awareness, politeness, empathy and compassion, positive language use, caution and restraint, thinking before speaking, and sensitivity to others' emotions and mental health state. These findings underscore the critical role of politeness and polite expressions, mindful and empathetic language in promoting positive social interactions and psychological well-being. The study recommends that educators, parents, and caregivers actively foster politeness, empathy, mindfulness, positive language use, and effective conflict-resolution skills. In the nutshell, this research contributes to the ongoing debate on mental health issues among university students understanding of how intentional and compassionate communication can support healthier relationships in institutions of learning and other social environments.

Keywords: language, communication, mental health, politeness, relationships

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Introduction

Mental health challenges have become increasingly prevalent among young people, particularly university students. Language is the primary medium of interaction within university environments, making it a critical factor in shaping students' psychological well-being. This study examines the impact of language use on mental health among students at Kyambogo University. It argues that the pervasive use of rude and negative language in everyday interactions among students may be detrimental to their mental health and overall well-being. Consequently, the study seeks to investigate the relationship between language use and mental health outcomes, as well as to identify strategies for promoting positive, respectful, and empathetic communication within the university community. Language as a means of communication is key in establishing lasting relationships among communicants. Effective communication on the other hand plays a vital role in maintaining good mental health and well-being among university students. Research findings reveal that social capital and effective communication skills are strong predictors of better psychological well-being (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rachmad, 2022). Language, as a fundamental aspect of communication, has the power to either positively or negatively impact an individual's mental health. For instance, positive language can foster a sense of belonging, encourage social support, and promote self-esteem, ultimately, it contributes to better mental health outcomes. On the other hand, negative language can lead to social isolation, decreased self-esteem, and increased stress levels, exacerbating mental health issues (Penner et al., 2021).

The mental health and well-being of Kyambogo University students, in particular, can be influenced by the language used in their daily interactions. The university's linguistic and cultural diversity can either facilitate or hinder effective communication, depending on how language is used (Fatih et al., 2025). For example, language barriers can lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalization, negatively impacting mental health. Conversely, inclusive language practices can promote a sense of community and social connection, supporting the mental health and well-being of students (Vertino, 2014).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions to examine the problem under investigation.

- i. How does language use affect the mental health and well-being of Kyambogo University students?
- ii. What impact does communication have on the well-being of university students?
- iii. Who is responsible for promoting positive mental health among university students?

Review of Related Literature

Mental health is a growing concern worldwide, with millions of people affected by mental health disorders every year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health disorder each year, with anxiety and depression being the most common disorders (WHO, 2022). The prevalence of mental health disorders is particularly high among young people, with a recent study indicating that 1 in 5 university students experience a mental health disorder (Osborn et al., 2022).

The state of mental health is particularly alarming in Uganda, where mental health services are often inadequate and inaccessible. A recent study found that 1 in 4 Ugandans experience a mental health disorder, with depression and anxiety being the most common disorders (Opio

et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study found that mental health stigma is widespread in Uganda, with many people with mental health disorders experiencing social isolation and discrimination. This assertion calls for the need for increased awareness and education about mental health, as well as improved access to mental health services. This present study aims to demonstrate that proper use of language could be a preventive measure to mental health issues and promote mental health wellbeing.

Research shows that Language plays a crucial role in shaping our experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others (Volkow et al., 2021). According to the sociolinguistic theory, language is not just a means of communication, but also a tool for constructing and negotiating social relationships and personal identity (Aliyeva, 2023). In the context of mental health, language can have a profound impact on an individual's well-being. For instance, positive language can foster a sense of belonging, encourage social support, and promote self-esteem, ultimately contributing to better mental health outcomes (Penner et al., 2021). According to Volkow et al. (2021), the choice of words used can have a significant impact on the mental health of the users. For instance, according to this research, since language plays a major role in shaping people's thoughts and beliefs, scientific communication can sometimes be an inadvertent vector of harmful stereotypes and assumptions. Much as this research is in the field of medicine, its emphasis on the diction used cannot be underrated. It echoes what this study aims to achieve. That is sensitivity in the choice of words used in daily interaction (Rys et al., 2020).

Communication is a vital aspect of language, and it plays a significant role in shaping our mental health and well-being. Effective communication can help individuals build strong relationships, manage stress, and cope with hardships (Fatih et al., 2025). On the other hand, poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and social isolation, exacerbating mental health issues (Shahi, 2024). In the context of university students, communication is particularly important, as it can help them navigate academic pressures, build social relationships, and access support services (Trisyanti & Hidayah, 2025).

The relationship between language, communication, and mental health is complex and multifaceted. Research has shown that language can be both a source of stress and a tool for coping with stress. For instance, individuals who experience language barriers or communication difficulties may feel anxious, frustrated, or isolated, ultimately affecting their mental health and well-being (Fatih et al., 2025). On the other hand, individuals who possess effective communication skills may be better equipped to manage stress, build social relationships, and access support services.

The impact of language and communication on mental health and well-being is particularly significant in the context of university students. Research has shown that university students experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, often due to academic pressures, social isolation, and language barriers (Shahi, 2024). Effective communication and language skills can help university students navigate these challenges, build strong relationships, and access support services. However, language barriers and communication difficulties can exacerbate mental health issues, thus, the need for targeted interventions and support services since language shapes the way individuals think about themselves (Ellis, 2016; Flusberg et al., 2024; Zhou, 2023).

On the other hand, research posts family, friends and school as vital in promoting mental health well-being among the young. According to Coverdale and Long (2015), their study identified

family, friends, and schools as a possibly good environment for supporting and promoting the emotional well-being of learners. In their study, they emphasised positive attitude change towards young people, as promoting a sense of belonging and community citizenship. When respectful and polite language is used whether at family, social network or school environment level, the young grow with confidence and are able to respect others in their language use (LaGree et al., 2023). The use of respectful language shapes the mental processing of language use among the communicants.

In conclusion, the relationship between language, communication, and mental health is complex and multifaceted. Research has shown that language and communication can have a profound impact on mental health and well-being, particularly in the context of university students. Effective communication and language skills can help individuals build strong relationships, manage stress, and access support services. However, language barriers and communication difficulties can exacerbate mental health issues, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support services.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The study population consisted of undergraduate students at Kyambogo University. A survey questionnaire was administered to a sample of 147 students to collect quantitative data on their language use, communication patterns, and mental health outcomes. Additionally, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with students to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions of language, communication, and mental health. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study was guided by ethical principles, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Methods and Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing two primary instruments. A customized Language Use Questionnaire was designed to assess students' language use, communication patterns, and language preferences. Additionally, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with students to gather rich, qualitative insights into their experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding language, communication, and mental health.

Results of the Study

The results of this study are presented in three sections in accordance with the research questions of the study.

The data collected in response to question one of the research study which sought to examine how language use affects mental health and wellbeing of university students revealed three themes: The Power of language as a catalyst for building or destroying, guiding principles for effective communication, The Impact of Polite and Respectful Language, and the Transformative Power of Respectful Communication.

The Power of Language: A Catalyst for Building or Destroying

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and its impact on individuals and relationships cannot be overstated. The words we choose, the tone we use, and the context in which we communicate can either uplift and empower or demean and devastate. This notion is succinctly captured in the idea that language has the power to build or destroy someone. To explore this concept further, we posed the question: “Do you agree that language has the power to build or destroy someone?” The responses, presented below, offer valuable insights into the perceived impact of language on individuals and relationships.

Table 1

The Power of Language: A Catalyst for Building or Destroying

Response	Number of Mentions	Percentages	Comment
Yes	160	99.4%	Absolutely
No	1	0.6%	Negligible
Maybe	00	00%	No doubt
Somehow	00	00%	No doubt

The findings presented in Table 1 revealed a striking consensus among respondents, with an overwhelming 99.4% (n = 160) acknowledging that language has the power to build or destroy someone. This near-unanimous agreement underscores the profound impact of language on individuals, highlighting its potential to shape self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being. The respondents' recognition of language as a powerful tool emphasizes its dual capacity to either uplift or devastate, underscoring the importance of mindful communication. The consensus across respondents suggests that this perspective transcends individual differences, backgrounds, and experiences, emphasizing the universal significance of language in shaping human relationships and experiences. The chat below serves the purposes of visual enhancement.

The Impact of Polite and Respectful Language

The qualitative data presented below was collected through a structured questionnaire, which solicited responses to seven key questions designed to explore the intricacies of language use. One of these questions, “Describe briefly how you feel when someone speaks nicely to you,” yielded 176 responses, which were subsequently coded into three dominant themes. These themes, which emerged from the data, provide insight into the emotional and behavioral impacts of positive language interactions.

Table 2*Feelings Developed When Someone Speaks Nicely*

Feelings of Ecstasy	Behavioural Emotions	Openness Emotions
Happy, Loved, Valued, Respected, Good, Comfortable, Delighted, Appreciated, Grateful, Joyful, Excited, Relaxed, Calm, Special, Treasured, Cherished, Humbled, Motivated, Confident, Glad	Open up, share ideas, engage in conversation, show appreciation, return positive energy, feel encouraged to communicate, listen actively, Provide feedback	Reduces anxiety and stress, boosts self-esteem, inspires positive behavior, creates a sense of friendship, evokes a sense of worth, makes me feel civilized, encourages positive attitude, fosters a sense of belonging, Promotes effective communication, Shows appreciation for kindness

The data revealed that when someone speaks nicely, individuals experience a range of positive emotions, behavioral responses, and openness. The findings underscore three dominant themes. The feelings of ecstasy that gained the majority of responses (Happy, Loved, Valued, Respected,) indicate that positive language interactions evoke strong positive emotions, creating a sense of well-being and happiness. In the same way, behavioral emotions that gained significant number of responses (Open up, share ideas, engage in conversation, etc.) suggest that positive language interactions encourage individuals to become more engaged, more communicative, and more receptive. Similarly, openness too gained significant responses (Reduces anxiety and stress, boosts self-esteem, etc.) indicate that positive language interactions promote a sense of openness, leading to increased confidence, self-esteem, and effective communication.

The Impact of Rude or Cruel Language

Language has the power to shape our experiences, relationships, and sense of self-worth. One respondent said: *“When someone spoke rudely or cruelly, it could have a profound impact on emotional and psychological well-being of the recipient.”* This data presentation underscored the ways in which individuals respond to rude or cruel language, highlighting the common themes and emotions that emerge. The following table and themes summarize the responses of 162 individuals who shared how they feel when someone speaks rudely or cruelly to them.

Table 3*The Impact of Rude or Cruel Language*

Emotional Pain	Loss of Self-Worth	Defensiveness and Withdrawal	Confusion and Frustration
Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy Traumatized, Disappointed, Unwanted, Afraid, Desire to retaliate	Disrespected Not valued Inadequate Unimportant Worthless Degraded Humiliated	Want to leave Ignore Defiant Withdrawn Unwilling to engage Defensive	Confused Frustrated Unsettled Perplexed Annoyed Emotional numbness Helplessness

The findings presented in Table 3 revealed that when individuals were exposed to rude or cruel language, they experience a range of negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The emotional pain which gained significant responses (Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy,

Traumatized, etc.) indicate that rude or cruel language can cause significant emotional distress, leading to feelings of pain, sadness, and anger. On top of that loss of Self-worth too gained significant responses (disrespected, not valued, Inadequate, unimportant, Worthless, etc.) suggesting that rude or cruel language can erode an individual's sense of self-worth, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Lastly rude and cruel language leads to defensiveness and withdrawal, (want to leave, Ignore, defiant, withdrawn, unwilling to engage, etc.) which indicates that individuals may become defensive and/or withdraw from interactions as a coping mechanism to deal with the emotional pain caused by rude or cruel language. Lastly, confusion and frustration, (Confused, Frustrated, Unsettled, Perplexed, Annoyed, etc.) as a response to rude and cruel language suggest that rude or cruel language can create cognitive dissonance, leading to feelings of confusion, frustration, and emotional numbness.

The Relationship Between Language Use and Mental Health

A survey of 170 respondents was conducted to investigate the perceived relationship between language use and mental health. The results revealed a significant consensus (98.2%, n = 167) among respondents, indicating a strong belief in the existence of a relationship between language use and mental health. This finding suggests a high level of awareness regarding the profound impact of language on emotional well-being. Language has the power to shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, with negative language patterns (e.g., self-criticism, rumination) contributing to mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Conversely, positive language patterns (e.g., gratitude, self-compassion) can promote mental well-being and resilience.

The strong consensus among respondents underscores the importance of considering the role of language in maintaining good mental health. It also highlights the need for mindful communication, which involves being aware of the language we use and its potential impact on ourselves and others. Furthermore, positive language practices can help cultivate language patterns that promote self-care, self-compassion, and emotional well-being. Language-based interventions may also offer a promising approach to developing therapies and interventions that harness the power of language to support mental health.

A small minority of respondents (1.8%, n = 3) disagreed with the notion that language use is related to mental health, potentially due to differing perspectives or experiences. Nevertheless, the overwhelming consensus (98.1%, n = 173) underscores the significance of the relationship between language and mental health, highlighting the need for further research and attention in this area. These results are illustrated in the chart below for visual enhancement.

The Individuals Responsible for Promoting Mental Health Well-being Among University Students

The data collected in response to the third question of the study, which sought to identify the key individuals involved in promoting mental health wellness among university students, revealed that lecturers, parents, the individuals themselves, and their peers are the primary actors in either promoting or hindering mental health wellness.

Do you think Lecturers are responsible for mental health state of the learners?

A total of 171 respondents answered the question, “Do you think lecturers are responsible for the mental health state of learners?” The responses revealed a diverse range of opinions. Approximately 46.6% (n = 76) of respondents believed that lecturers bear some responsibility for the mental health state of learners, while 14.7% (n = 24) disagreed. A significant proportion of respondents remained undecided or ambiguous, with 19.6% (n = 32) selecting “Maybe” and 19% (n = 31) indicating that lecturers have some influence, but not entirely.

The distribution of responses is presented in the table below:

Table 4

Response to Whether Lecturers Are Responsible for the Students’ Mental Health

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage	Comment
Yes	76	46.6%	They are responsible
No	24	14.7%	They are not responsible
Maybe	32	19.6%	Not sure if they are responsible or not
Somehow	31	19%	They are responsible but not entirely

The findings indicate that approximately half of the respondents (46.6%) believe that lecturers play a significant role in influencing the mental health state of learners. This perception is consistent with existing research, which emphasizes the profound impact of teacher-student relationships on students' emotional well-being and mental health (e.g., [insert reference]). The diversity of opinions among respondents, however, also acknowledges the complexity of mental health issues and the multifaceted nature of factors contributing to them. This is well illustrated in the chart below for visual enhancement.

In response to the question, “Which other categories of people use language that can cause mental health issues to Kyambogo University students?”, a total of 164 respondents identified various individuals and groups whose language can potentially contribute to mental health concerns among students. The findings are summarized in the table below:

Table 5

Various Categories of People Who Use Rude Language

Category of People	Mentions	Percentage	Comment
Fellow Students/Peers	73	44.5%	Insensitive communication
Non-Teaching Staff (Security, Cleaners)	24	14.6%	Need workshops
Administrators (Deans, Bursar office)	15	9.1%	Need sensitisation
Friends/Lovers/Relatives	13	7.9%	Lack exposure
Health Workers/Medical Team	8	4.9%	Need workshops
Security Guards (Gatemen/ Police)	7	4.3%	Need sensitisation
Librarians	4	2.4	Less likely
Motorcyclists/Boda-Boda Riders	3	1.8	Not so common
Social Media Influencers	5	3.0%	Need training

The table 5 highlights various contexts in which learning of confidence occurs, with a focus on the categories of people who can impact students' confidence. The findings suggest that fellow students/peers (44.5%) and non-teaching staff (14.6%) are the most common sources of

influence, followed by administrators (9.1%), friends/lovers/relatives (7.9%), and health workers/medical teams (4.9%).

Discussion of the Results

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and its impact on individuals and relationships cannot be overstated. The words we choose, the tone we use, and the context in which we communicate can either uplift and empower or demean and devastate. This notion is succinctly captured in the idea that language has the power to build or destroy someone.

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal a striking consensus among respondents, with an overwhelming 99.4% (n = 160) acknowledging that language has the power to build or destroy someone. This near-unanimous agreement underscores the profound impact of language on individuals, highlighting its potential to shape self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being.

These results are consistent with research on the social and emotional impact of language, which suggests that language can have a profound influence on an individual's sense of self-worth, emotional state, and relationships (Rys et al., 2020). The respondents' recognition of language as a powerful tool emphasizes its dual capacity to either uplift or devastate, underscoring the importance of mindful communication.

The guiding principles for effective communication outlined in Table 2 demonstrate the importance of thoughtful and empathetic communication. The themes of mindfulness, empathy, positive language use, and caution emphasize the need for individuals to be aware of the impact of their words on others. These principles are consistent with research on effective communication, which suggests that mindful and empathetic communication can foster positive relationships, promote understanding, and create a supportive social environment (Rys et al., 2020).

The qualitative data presented in this study pinpoint to the profound impact of polite and respectful language on individuals' emotional and behavioral responses. When asked to describe how they feel when someone speaks nicely to them, participants' responses yielded three dominant themes: feelings of happiness and well-being, increased self-esteem and confidence, and enhanced social connections and relationships. These findings are consistent with the study by (Trisyanti & Hidayah, 2025). Whose study emphasises polite and respectful language, that can increase feelings of happiness and well-being which boosts positive social interactions can enhance self-esteem and confidence. One participant noted, "When someone speaks nicely to me, I feel happy and valued. It boosts my self-esteem and makes me feel more confident." This response underlines the significant impact of positive language interactions on individuals' emotional and psychological well-being.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that polite and respectful language can have a profound impact on mental health outcomes. As noted by Penner et al. (2021), "Mental health is closely linked to our relationships with others, and positive social interactions can play a critical role in promoting mental well-being."

Furthermore, the findings revealed that when individuals are exposed to rude or cruel language, they experience a range of negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The emotional pain which gained significant responses (Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy, Traumatized, etc.) indicate that rude or cruel language can cause significant emotional distress, leading to

feelings of pain, sadness, and anger. On top of that loss of Self-Worth too gained significant responses (disrespected, not valued, inadequate, unimportant, Worthless, etc.) suggest that rude or cruel language can erode an individual's sense of self-worth, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. This is consistent with the study by Ashraf et al. (2025) & Rachmad (2022) who argue that positive communication, can create a positive emotional climate, leading to increased feelings of happiness and well-being, and research by Volkow et al. (2021), suggest that the choice of words used, especially those evoked by positive language interactions, can broaden an individual's attention, increase creativity, and enhance social connections. This present study asserts that effective communication is the foundation of healthy relationships and personal growth, influencing emotional well-being, self-perception, and interpersonal relations. This study explored the transformative power of respectful communication, examining how polite language can shape personal growth, relationships, and emotional experiences (LaGree et al., 2023).

In regard to who was responsible for promoting mental health wellness, a total of 169 respondents answered the question, "Between lecturers and your parents, who is responsible for your mental health state?" The responses revealed a clear trend, with the majority of respondents (71%, n = 120) believing that both lecturers and parents share responsibility for their mental health state. This finding suggests that respondents recognize the interconnectedness of their relationships with lecturers and parents and the potential impact of both on their mental health. These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasised the importance of both family and educational environments in promoting mental health and well-being among young people (Coverdale & Long, 2015). The finding that most respondents attributed shared responsibility to both lecturers and parents validate the need for a collaborative approach to supporting mental health, involving both family members and educational institutions.

Conclusions

This study therefore, makes several conclusions.

This study demonstrated that language plays a powerful role in shaping mental health outcomes. Rude and cruel language, particularly when used repeatedly in everyday interactions, can have serious and lasting effects on individuals' emotional and psychological well-being. The findings confirm that hurtful communication not only damages relationships but also contributes to the development of mental health challenges among individuals. Therefore, promoting respectful, polite, and empathetic communication is essential for enhancing mental health and creating supportive environments, especially within university communities.

Lecturers play an important, though not exclusive, role in shaping students' mental health. The perception held by a substantial proportion of students aligns with existing research that emphasizes the significance of positive teacher–student relationships in supporting emotional well-being. However, the varied responses also demonstrated that mental health outcomes cannot be attributed to a single factor, but the need to consider the broader academic and social environment when addressing students' mental health needs.

Lastly, the study demonstrated that polite and respectful communication significantly enhances individuals' willingness to take responsibility for their actions. When a supportive and non-threatening environment is created, respectful language encourages honesty, accountability,

and learning from mistakes. This finding reinforces the argument that communication style is a powerful tool for fostering personal development and positive behavioural change, particularly within academic and professional settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

Universities and other tertiary institutions implement awareness programs and workshops that promote positive, respectful, and empathetic communication among students and staff. Communication skills training should be integrated into student orientation programs and counselling services to help individuals understand the psychological impact of language use. Furthermore, university administrations should develop and enforce policies that discourage the use of rude or harmful language while encouraging respectful dialogue. Mental health support services should also address communication-related stress and trauma to help affected individuals cope effectively. Future research is recommended to further explore the long-term effects of language use on mental health across different social and cultural contexts.

In addition, institutions, particularly universities, actively promote the use of polite and respectful language in daily interactions. Training programs and workshops focusing on effective and empathetic communication should be introduced to help individuals understand the impact of their language on others. Communication strategies that emphasize kindness, understanding, and respect should be incorporated into conflict resolution and counseling practices. Educators, administrators, and student leaders should model respectful communication to encourage a culture that supports positive behavioral change, motivation, and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, universities equip lecturers with training in mental health awareness and supportive communication practices to enhance their positive influence on students' well-being. Institutions should also adopt comprehensive mental health strategies that involve counseling services, peer support programs, and stress-management initiatives. Furthermore, collaboration between lecturers, counselors, and university administrators should be strengthened to ensure early identification and support for students experiencing mental health challenges. This integrated approach will help address the multifaceted nature of mental health within the university community.

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

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this research work solely to support the writing process, including improving clarity, grammar, structure, and language expression of the manuscript. The usage was limited to grammatical, spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The authors further declare that, apart from ChatGPT, 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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