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Perceived Value and Brand Loyalty in China's Tea Industry: Evidence from the S-O-R Framework

Lei Peilin[1*], Tara Ahmed Mohammed[2], Wang Shiyao[2], Chen Jiuhong[3]

[1]Xinyang College of Agriculture and Forestry, Xinyang 464000, Henan, China
[2]SEGi University, Kota Damansara, 47810 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
[3]Sichuan Business Vocational College, Chengdu, 611131, Sichuan, China

[*] *Corresponding author e-mail: 564292664@qq.com*

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ABSTRACT

In the context of China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, developing strong agricultural brands has become a key mechanism to support rural industrial upgrading and farmers' income growth. This study investigates how different dimensions of customer perceived value, namely functional value, economic value, and social value, influence brand loyalty in the tea industry, which plays a vital role in rural economies. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, this research focuses on the direct effects of these value dimensions on consumer loyalty. A total of 408 valid responses were collected from tea consumers in China through an online survey. Structural equation modelling was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0. The findings reveal that all three perceived value dimensions significantly predict brand loyalty, with economic value exerting the strongest influence. The study provides theoretical insights into value-based loyalty formation and offers practical implications for building sustainable rural origin brands aligned with China's rural development goals.

1. Introduction

China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, launched in 2018, prioritizes the transformation of traditional agriculture through industrial upgrading, brand building, and rural economic development. Its core goals include increasing farmers' incomes, enhancing rural industries, and strengthening regional agricultural brands. Within this national agenda, tea has emerged as a strategic crop. It supports the livelihoods of millions of rural households and carries historical, cultural, and economic significance. Yet, despite China's leadership in tea production, the industry faces persistent challenges such as fragmented branding, low consumer loyalty, and weak competitiveness, especially in global markets.

Tea is the most popular non-alcoholic beverage after water, with around three billion cups consumed daily (Mokrysz, 2024). Beyond its cultural heritage, tea offers scientifically supported health benefits, such as antiaging, cardiovascular protection, and anti-inflammatory effects (Pan et al., 2022). The global tea market is expanding rapidly, with retail sales projected to exceed US$318 billion by 2025 (Bu et al., 2020). As the birthplace of tea, China leads global production, yielding over 2.79 million tons in 2019 and

contributing nearly 2% to national agricultural GDP (H. Wang et al., 2022). However, Chinese tea brands remain weak. Most producers are small scale operations in rural counties, lacking the marketing capacity, standardization, and consumer engagement needed to build strong, loyal brands (M. Fan & Wang, 2022). Many consumers still view tea generically, as black or green, without recognizing distinct brand attributes (Zheng, 2023). This lack of brand identity limits differentiation and consumer retention, reducing the sector's impact on rural revitalization.

Understanding what motivates consumers to remain loyal to rural origin tea brands is therefore a strategic and policy relevant issue. Customer Perceived Value (CPV), the overall assessment of benefits versus costs in a transaction, is a key driver of loyalty (Zeithaml, 1988). CPV includes three components: functional value (product utility), economic value (price fairness), and social value (status or identity). Consumers are more likely to be satisfied and loyal when they perceive strong value across these dimensions (Fikri & Risqiani, 2023). According to Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, external value perceptions act as stimuli that trigger internal evaluations and behavioural outcomes such as brand loyalty. This framework underpins the current study. Although the "organism" component (internal state) is not explicitly modelled, the framework provides a useful lens to examine direct links between perceived value and loyalty behaviour.

Previous studies on tea consumer behaviour often focus on product quality, certification, or brand personality (Bu et al., 2020) but offer limited insight into how functional, economic, and social value jointly shape brand loyalty, especially in rural contexts. Recent research has begun to explore brand identity and consumer experience (Chen et al., 2023) as well as the adoption of innovative tea products (Han & Fang, 2024). However, few studies integrate these dimensions into a unified loyalty framework. Moreover, existing literature tends to emphasize urban or premium markets, overlooking rural dynamics where affordability and cultural relevance are crucial. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how value-based mechanisms influence brand loyalty among Chinese tea buyers, offering practical insights to support rural brand development in line with China's Rural Revitalization Strategy.

2. Literature Review

Building brand loyalty has gained renewed importance under China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, where agricultural branding plays a pivotal role in driving rural economic transformation. Tea, as a culturally and economically significant crop, is central to this effort. However, fragmented production systems and weak brand identities present ongoing challenges. Enhancing customer perceived value (CPV) has thus emerged as a strategic approach for strengthening loyalty, particularly for rural-origin tea brands.

Customer Perceived Value (CPV) is a foundational concept in marketing. It reflects a customer's overall assessment of the benefits received versus the sacrifices made in a market exchange (Zeithaml, 1988; Holbrook, 1999). Originally defined as a price–quality trade-off (Dodds et al., 1991), CPV has evolved into a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, social, and environmental dimensions. Sweeney and Soutar (2001) proposed a widely adopted model comprising functional, emotional, social, and price value (Papista et al., 2017; Leckie et al., 2021).

Functional value refers to the usefulness derived from a product's essential performance qualities, such as flavour, safety, and consistency (Woodruff, 1997). In tea consumption, this dimension is particularly important, as consumers seek reliability and quality. Research shows that consistent product functionality enhances satisfaction and fosters brand loyalty (Negassa et al., 2023). Febian and Syed Annuar (2020) similarly found that perceived functional benefits significantly influenced seniors' intention to consume health-oriented foods. Economic value focuses on financial utility relative to cost (Prior, 1998). In China's price-sensitive tea market, where product differentiation is limited, value-for-money perceptions strongly

influence repeat purchasing behaviour (Papista et al., 2017; Negassa et al., 2023).Social value, defined as the perceived social benefits of consumption (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), also plays a meaningful role. In collectivist cultures like China, tea is deeply embedded in rituals and social practices. Brands that align with these cultural values can reinforce consumer identity and strengthen loyalty (Yalçıntekin & Saygılı, 2020; Leckie et al., 2021).

Brand loyalty is understood as a favourable attitude that drives repeated purchases (Assael, 1992). It enhances retention, reduces price sensitivity, and fosters positive word-of-mouth. Loyalty stems from emotional attachment and perceived brand trust (Miryanda, 2023). Mobil et al. (2019) noted that perceived quality and self-esteem significantly shape consumer purchase intentions in high-involvement products, reinforcing the role of CPV in loyalty formation.

The connection between CPV and brand loyalty is well-established. Higher perceived value enhances satisfaction and trust, thereby reinforcing behavioural loyalty (Fikri & Risqiani, 2023). Functional, economic, and social values are key predictors of long-term brand commitment (Negassa et al., 2023). However, limited empirical research addresses how these dimensions jointly affect loyalty in fragmented sectors like China's tea industry (Zheng, 2023; Xue, 2022).

To be theoretically, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model is employed (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In consumer contexts, stimuli (e.g., product value) affect internal states (organism), which lead to behavioural outcomes. While internal affective variables are sometimes included, recent studies apply a simplified version that directly links stimuli to response (Sumardi et al., 2025). This study adopts the streamlined approach to focus on direct value–loyalty relationships, avoiding model complexity and multicollinearity risks in early-stage rural branding research. However, excluding the "organism" component limits insight into psychological mechanisms. Future studies could incorporate mediators such as trust, satisfaction, or emotional attachment to enrich the theoretical depth and better capture how internal states translate perceived value into loyalty behaviours.

Based on the theoretical rationale and empirical evidence, three hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Functional value positively affects brand loyalty in China's tea industry.
H2: Economic value positively affects brand loyalty in China's tea industry.
H3: Social value positively affects brand loyalty in China's tea industry.

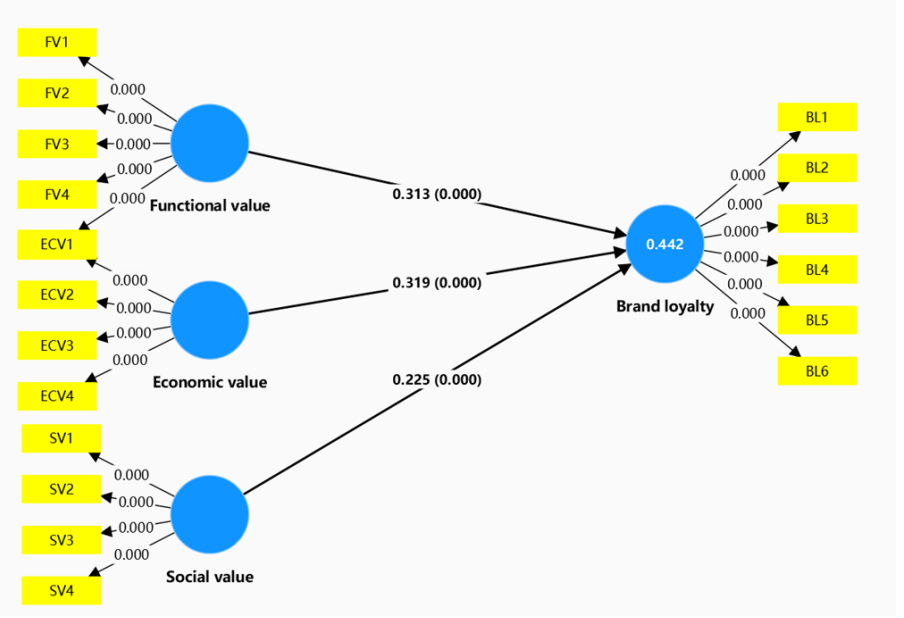

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

This study adopted the "research onion" framework(Saunders et al. ,2015), grounded in positivism, which emphasizes objectivity and measurable facts. A deductive approach was employed to formulate hypotheses based on existing theories, especially the S-O-R framework (Proudfoot, 2023). A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used to analyse consumer behaviour in China's tea industry at a single point in time. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, both online via Questionnaire Star and offline to reach less digitally connected respondents. This mixed-mode approach enhanced sample diversity and response quality (Schillewaert & Meulemeester, 2005).

The target population comprised tea consumers in China aged 20 and above. Non-probability sampling is justified here as it efficiently targets Chinese tea consumers (a specific group) when a complete sampling frame is unavailable, reducing research costs; however, it has limitations, such as restricted sample representativeness which may weaken the external validity of findings. According to G*Power criteria (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012) and Morgan and Hunt (1994), statistical validity requires at least 384 responses. There were 408 valid replies in all. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), which is well known for its accuracy in gauging consumer sentiments, was used to measure core constructs and measure demographic characteristics in the two portions of the questionnaire (Aybek & Toraman, 2022). To ensure data relevance, a screening question."Have you purchased tea in the past six months?" was placed at the beginning, and only those who answered "Yes" continued with the full questionnaire.

Measurement items were adapted from established studies. Functional value items were taken from Slack et al. (2020), such as "This product has consistent quality" and "This product meets my expectations for quality." Economic value items were adapted from Rohman et al. (2023), such as "It offers value for money" and "It offers better cost-effectiveness compared to others." Social value was measured using items from Mohd Suki et al. (2022), including "Buying this product improves the way I am perceived."

Brand loyalty items were drawn from Ikramuddin and Mariyudi (2021), such as "I feel strong loyalty toward this brand" and "This brand is my first choice."

SmartPLS 4.0 was used for structural equation modelling and SPSS for descriptive statistics in the data analysis process. Because it works well for modelling complex interactions and is appropriate for small to medium-sized samples, partial least squares structural equation modelling(PLS-SEM), was employed. The significance of path coefficients was evaluated using a bootstrapping process with 5,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2019). This study followed ethical standards (approved by SEGi University Ethics Committee): participants gave informed consent (purpose and withdrawal rights clarified) before the survey, and all voluntary participation rules were complied with.

4. Findings and Analysis

After a rigorous data cleaning process that removed responses with unusually short completion times, repetitive patterns, logical inconsistencies, or excessive missing values, a total of 408 valid questionnaires were retained. All descriptive and structural analyses were based on this cleaned dataset.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

variable	Options	frequency	%
age	20-29	90	22.1
	30-39	114	27.9
	40-49	96	23.5
	50-59	83	20.3
	60 and above	25	6.1
Income level（monthly）	Less than 3,000 yuan	45	11
	3001-5000 yuan	133	32.6
	5001-7000 yuan	100	24.5
	70,001-10,000 yuan	99	24.3
	10,001 yuan and above	31	7.6
Level of education	No formal education/ Primary school	35	8.6
	junior high school	43	10.5
	High School/Technical Secondary School	87	21.3
	College/Undergraduate	195	47.8
	Graduate student or above	48	11.8

Descriptive statistics were performed using SPSS to examine the sample's demographic composition and key variables. The majority of respondents were aged 20–49, with the largest group in the 30–39 age range. Most participants reported a monthly income between 3,001 and 7,000 RMB, and nearly 48% held a college or undergraduate degree, indicating a moderately well-educated, middle-income consumer base.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Functional Value	408	1	5	3.31	0.6448	-0.153	0.636
Social Value	408	1	5	3.3254	0.73123	-0.378	0.359
Economic Value	408	1	5	3.3529	0.75407	-0.209	0.357
Brand Loyalty	408	1	5	3.2098	0.7416	0.393	0.135

For the study variables Functional Value, Economic Value Social, Value, and Brand Loyalty. The mean scores were slightly above the midpoint on the five-point Likert scale, suggesting generally positive consumer evaluations. Economic Value showed the highest standard deviation, indicating greater response variability.

An assessment of skewness and kurtosis values revealed that all variables fell within acceptable thresholds for normality. Most constructs showed slightly negative skewness, indicating a tendency toward agreement. Brand Loyalty was the only construct with a positive skewness, reflecting lower levels of loyalty among some respondents. Kurtosis values remained well within the ±3 range, supporting the assumption of approximate normal distribution, which justifies the use of parametric analysis in subsequent sections.

Using Cronbach's alpha, rho_a, and composite reliability, the internal consistency of the constructs Brand Loyalty, Economic Value, Functional Value, and Social Value was evaluated. Strong internal dependability was confirmed when all reliability indicators were above the traditional cutoff point of 0.70. In particular, composite reliability ratings ranged from 0.907 to 0.922, and Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.863 for Economic Value to 0.893 for Functional Value. These findings confirm that the measurement items consistently reflect their intended latent constructs.

Table 3. Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Loyalty	0.877	0.88	0.907	0.618
Economic Value	0.863	0.864	0.907	0.709
Functional Value	0.893	0.902	0.922	0.702
Social Value	0.879	0.886	0.916	0.733

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and item outer loadings were used to demonstrate convergent validity. Economic Value, Functional Value, Social Value, and Brand Loyalty all showed AVE values above the suggested minimum of 0.50, with Economic Value being 0.709, Functional Value being 0.702, Social Value not specified here, and Brand Loyalty being 0.618. The item loadings exceeded the 0.70 criterion, ranging from 0.743 to 0.883. According to these findings, each construct accounts for a sufficiently large proportion of the variance in its respective indicators.

To evaluate discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was applied. The square roots of each construct’s AVE were greater than the correlations with other constructs, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct and more strongly correlated with its own indicators than with those of other constructs.

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Results

	Brand loyalty	Economic value	Functional value	Social value
Brand loyalty	0.786			
Economic value	0.526	0.842		
Functional value	0.531	0.383	0.838	
Social value	0.482	0.388	0.428	0.856

To rule out multicollinearity, collinearity diagnostics were conducted. The measurement model does not have multicollinearity issues, as seen by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which ranged from 1.798 to 2.700 and were much below the cut-off value of 5.

All aspects of perceived value and brand loyalty were found to be statistically significantly correlated ($p < 0.001$) by the structural model analysis. The greatest beneficial influence was exerted by economic value ($\beta = 0.319$, $t = 7.580$), which was closely followed by functional value ($\beta = 0.313$, $t = 7.530$). Although its impact was relatively modest, social value also shown a significant beneficial effect ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 4.915$). All of the suggested hypotheses received support from the standardized path coefficients and significance levels. These findings highlight the crucial role that customer perceived value plays in promoting brand loyalty and offer empirical support for the hypothesized connections.

Table 5. Path Coefficient Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Result
H1	Economic value -> Brand loyalty	0.319	0.321	0.042	7.58	0	Supported
H2	Functional value -> Brand loyalty	0.313	0.313	0.042	7.53	0	Supported
H3	Social value -> Brand loyalty	0.225	0.224	0.046	4.915	0	Supported

The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2), which was 0.442 for brand loyalty, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.438. This suggests that the three value dimensions collectively account for approximately 44.2% of the variance in brand loyalty—an acceptable level in consumer research. Effect size calculations (f^2) indicated small to moderate contributions from EV (0.144) and FV (0.133), and a small effect from SV (0.069). Additionally, the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value of 0.267 confirmed the model's predictive relevance.

Table 6. Summary of Structural Model Evaluation Results

Construct	R^2	f^2	Q^2
Brand loyalty	0.442		0.267
Economic value		0.144	
Functional value		0.133	
Social value		0.069	

Model fit was assessed via the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), which yielded a value of 0.054 for both the saturated and estimated models. This falls below the 0.08 threshold, suggesting that the model fits the data well.

Table 7. Model Fit (SRMR)

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.054	0.054

The results confirm that the measurement model possesses adequate reliability and validity, and that the structural model demonstrates satisfactory fit, explanatory strength, and predictive relevance. All three value dimensions, economic, functional, and social significantly contribute to brand loyalty. These findings reinforce the theoretical framework and offer practical implications for brand strategy development in the Chinese tea industry. In particular, emphasizing the economic and functional benefits of tea products may yield greater consumer loyalty, while social value, though less influential, remains an important complementary driver.

5. Discussion

This study examined how functional, economic, and social shape brand loyalty in China's tea industry. All three dimensions were found to have significant positive impacts, with economic value exerting the strongest effect. These findings not only contribute to consumer behavior theory but also offer timely insights into the advancement of China's Rural Revitalization Strategy which promotes agricultural modernization, brand development, and rural income growth through market-oriented transformation.

Functional value emphasizes core product attributes such as taste, freshness, and quality consistency. Prior research (Kurnianingsih & Riorini, 2021; Çetinkaya, 2020) has consistently shown that perceived functional reliability enhances satisfaction and fosters long-term brand attachment. In food and beverage categories, especially tea, product standardization and quality assurance are key (Chen & Hu, 2010; Bao & Bao, 2020). For China's fragmented rural tea sector, strengthening functional value requires investment in processing technology, quality certification, and packaging improvement, thereby elevating consumer trust and brand credibility.

Social value though less influential still plays a meaningful role. As suggested by Han et al. (2019), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), and Leckie et al. (2021), social approval and symbolic recognition are key loyalty drivers in collectivist cultures. In China, tea is more than a beverage. It is deeply integrated with social rituals, business customs, and cultural heritage. Rural tea brands can leverage this by highlighting regional identity, tea ceremony tradition, and ethnic storytelling, reinforced through geographical indication (GI) protections and cultural marketing programs (Yalçıntekin & Saygılı, 2020).

Economic value, defined by price fairness and value-for-money (Zeithaml, 1988; Prior, 1998), was the strongest predictor of brand loyalty in this study. It reflects consumers' perception that the benefits of a product justify its cost, particularly in low-differentiation markets. The prominence of economic value observed here is consistent with broader patterns across rural and price-sensitive markets in Asia. For example, Waebuesar et al. (2022) found that affordability and perceived fairness were key loyalty drivers in Thailand's agricultural cooperatives. Ong et al. (2023) similarly reported that among Chinese tea beverage consumers, economic considerations outweighed emotional or symbolic factors in repeat purchases. Wu et al. (2024) emphasized that digital platforms and cooperative branding in China's tea-producing regions enhance perceived economic value by reducing transaction costs and improving price transparency.

These findings suggest that in rural contexts, where disposable income is limited, brand awareness is low, and product choices are often utilitarian economic value becomes a decisive factor. Consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that deliver consistent quality at accessible prices. For rural producers operating with limited marketing budgets, strategies such as cooperative-based sales, short supply chains, and rural e-commerce platforms not only improve affordability but also enhance profit margins and consumer satisfaction. This reinforces the notion that economic value is not merely a pricing concern, but a strategic foundation for cultivating brand loyalty and supporting the broader goals of rural revitalization.

5.1 Strategic Implications

The combined explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.442$) validates the direct stimulus–response pathway in the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), illustrating how perceived value leads to loyalty even without modeling internal psychological states. This provides a conceptual foundation for building rural-origin consumer brands based on observable value attributes.

From a strategic standpoint, the findings suggest that rural tea enterprises should embed perceived value enhancement into their branding strategies. Functional improvements can be pursued through product traceability and standardization; economic value through value-for-money bundles, rural cooperative labels, and transparent pricing; and social value through localized narratives, festival tie-ins, and social media engagement. These efforts directly align with the goals of the Rural Revitalization Strategy to "strengthen brand competitiveness and expand rural income sources through high-quality agricultural development."

Furthermore, policymakers can support these initiatives by offering subsidies for quality certification, training programs for rural e-commerce branding, and market access platforms for local specialties. The integration of value-based branding into rural development pathways can transform fragmented agricultural outputs into cohesive and sustainable regional brands.

From an academic perspective, the results contribute to the literature on branding and consumer behaviour by validating perceived value as a multidimensional construct within rural origin sectors. The application of a simplified Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model without mediating variables demonstrates its effectiveness in capturing direct behavioural responses, providing a streamlined and practical framework for future empirical studies.

The findings provide practical and actionable insights for tea enterprises and rural brand developers. Enhancing perceived value through consistent product quality, fair pricing, and cultural authenticity can significantly strengthen brand competitiveness and foster consumer loyalty. Moreover, the study supports the objectives of China's Rural Revitalization Strategy by offering a consumer-centred framework for transforming fragmented rural tea production into sustainable, distinctive, and culturally resonant brands.

To deepen understanding of value-driven loyalty, future research could incorporate mediating variables such as trust, satisfaction, or emotional attachment to better explain the psychological mechanisms linking perceived value and brand loyalty. Broadening the geographic scope beyond urban consumers and employing longitudinal or experimental research designs would also provide richer insights into how loyalty dynamics evolve over time and across diverse consumer groups.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how functional, economic, and social value influence brand loyalty in China's tea industry. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, the research demonstrated

that perceived value functions as a direct external stimulus influencing consumer loyalty behaviours. Using data collected from 408 urban tea consumers in China, the analysis confirmed that all three value dimensions have significant positive effects on brand loyalty, with economic value exerting the strongest impact, followed by functional and social value.

The findings contribute to the growing literature on consumer behaviour and brand development by reaffirming perceived value as a multidimensional construct that drives loyalty. The study shows how functional, economic, and social value interact to shape consumer attachment within China's tea industry, where brand identity remains relatively underdeveloped. By applying a simplified S-O-R model without mediating variables, the research underscores the framework's effectiveness in capturing direct behavioural responses to perceived value and offers a clear approach for future empirical work in similar contexts.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

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