

The Effect of Empathy, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Social Support on Social Entrepreneurial Intention among Youth in Malaysia

Sylvia Nabila Azwa Ambad (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Business and Management,

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sabah,

88997 Kampus Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Tel: +6088-325151 E-mail: nabila1793@uitm.edu.my

Herwina Rosnan

Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School,

Universiti Teknologi MARA,

40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia

Tel: +603-5544 4744 E-mail: herwina@uitm.edu.my

Muhammad Faizal Samat

Faculty of Business and Management,

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor

40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia

Tel: +603-5543 5634 E-mail: faizal951@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of empathy (EM), social entrepreneurial self-efficacy (SE) and perceived social support (PS) on social entrepreneurial intention (SEI). The study employed a quantitative research survey to achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions using an online self-administered questionnaire adopted and modified from previous research. Data was collected using convenience sampling techniques from Malaysian youth between the ages of 18 and 30; 250 responses were collected. The data was then analyzed using SEM-PLS (SmartPLS 4.0). Only two out of the three hypotheses formulated were found to have significant relationships. Contrary to expectation, empathy did

not affect the inclination toward social entrepreneurial intention. Meanwhile, consistent with the theory of social-cognitive theory (SCT), social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and perceived social support have a positive effect on social entrepreneurial intention. This research fills the gaps in the limited research by using the three factors in the context of youth in developing countries such as Malaysia.

Keywords: empathy (EM), social entrepreneurial self-efficacy (SE) and perceived social support (PS) on social entrepreneurial intention (SEI), youth, Malaysia, social-cognitive theory

1. Introduction

In recent years, the value of social entrepreneurship has grown along with its popularity. It has received more prominence and acclaim for providing funds to tackle social and environmental challenges while also addressing economic concerns (Malaysia Social Entrepreneurship Blueprint 2030). Therefore, under the key government initiative to increase the number of social enterprises by 2030, it is time for researchers to assist policymakers, governments, private sectors, and entrepreneurs in identifying factors that influence the youth's intention to participate in the formation of social enterprises. Youth as a future leader is a key agent of change in the field of social entrepreneurship due to being creative, passionate and innovative in introducing a unique approach to address social, environmental, and economic issues (Bublitz et al., 2020).

Although research on social entrepreneurship is gaining popularity, the study on youth social entrepreneurial intention has not received significant attention as compared to conventional entrepreneurship (Ambad, 2022). Additionally, in Malaysia, there is a slow take up on social enterprise as currently, only 414 social enterprise companies are in the country, which has created 3,500 jobs. It is far from the target to create 10,000 social enterprises by 2030 with 92,000 job offerings to locals (Social Entrepreneurship Action Framework 2030/SEMy2030). With the heightened social, economic, and environmental issues such as food insecurity, economic disparities, and environmental degradation, the roles of social enterprises are critical to assisting the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable groups.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the effect of empathy, self-efficacy, and perceived social support on social entrepreneurial intention among youth in Malaysia. By examining these factors, we seek to enhance our understanding of the motivational drivers behind youth engagement in social entrepreneurship, especially in Malaysia. This study contributes to the limited studies on factors influencing social entrepreneurial intention among youth in Malaysia. Moreover, the findings from this study would assist in the design of intervention and support programs to nurture social entrepreneurship among Malaysian youth, which, in turn, promote sustainable development. Finally, from a policy perspective, understanding the factors that drive youth towards social entrepreneurship could guide policymakers in formulating policies and initiatives that create an enabling environment for youth-led social innovation and enterprise.

The subsequent parts of this paper are outlined as follows. Section 2 provides a review of relevant literature, emphasizing the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence related to

previous research on empathy, self-efficacy, perceived social support, and social entrepreneurial intention. Additionally, the research framework is presented in this section. Section 3 describes the research methodology, including the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques employed. Section 4 presents the findings of the study, followed by a discussion in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper with implications for theory and practice.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

This study adapts and modifies the renowned model for the determinant of SEI developed by Mair and Noboa (2006) and Hockerts (2015). Mair and Noboa (2006) developed their conceptual model based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the entrepreneurial event model (EEM). Hockerts (2015) later modified the model by excluding the EEM and adding social work experience as the antecedent of empathy, moral judgment, self-efficacy, and perceived presence of social support. For this study, three factors are used to examine their effect on social entrepreneurial intention: empathy, self-efficacy, and perceived social support. These factors are chosen based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as an underpinning theory. In other words, the underpinning theory of this study is based on TPB but the dimension has been modified to align with the social entrepreneurship concept. The original dimensions of TPB are attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. In this study, attitude is represented by empathy, perceived behavioral control is represented by self-efficacy, and subjective norms are represented by the presence of social support. The modification is based on the established conceptual study proposed by Mair and Noboa (2006) and further refined and tested empirically by Hockerts (2015). Their seminal works on the determinant of social entrepreneurial intention have been extensively used by prominent researchers on SEI, such as Younis et al. (2021), Hossain et al. (2021), and de Sousa-Filho et al. (2020). Apart from TPB, previous studies have also used other factors, such as perceived desirability and feasibility, prior experience, emotional factors, personality, skills and competencies, and motivational factors, which were identified as having influenced social entrepreneurial intention (Ambad, 2022). Despite the empirical evidence on factors affecting social entrepreneurial intention in Malaysia, research in the context of Malaysia using the three dimensions is scarce. For instance, a study by Mohamdi et al. (2022) did not include empathy and perceived social support to examine social entrepreneurial intention among undergraduate students in Malaysia.

2.1 *The Effect of Empathy on Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI)*

According to Dees (2012), empathy is considered a crucial personality attribute for social entrepreneurs and, as such, a significant precondition for their aims. In particular, Mair and Noboa (2006) developed a social entrepreneurial intention model that proposed empathy is an element that replaces the attitude dimensions because empathy is more appropriate for social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is about helping others to solve their social, economic, and environmental issues. Therefore, empathy is a crucial element in determining SEI, which is the ability to assess another person's emotional state and the propensity to react to another person's emotional state (Hockerts, 2017). The idea to incorporate the element of

empathy in the SEI model is based on the numerous psychology studies that show a positive correlation between high levels of empathy and increased helping conduct towards people in need (Davis et al., 1999). Empathy can be defined as the individual's capacity to understand and relate to the feelings of others (Preston et al., 2007) or their propensity to react emotionally and sympathetically to the circumstances of others (Goetz et al., 2010). Cognitive empathy, or the capacity to comprehend the emotional state of others, and affective empathy, or the propensity to respond to the emotional state of others, are the two types of empathy that are relevant to social entrepreneurs (Preston et al., 2007). However, not everyone with empathy is automatically interested in the idea of a social venture, nor do they intend to pursue such endeavors (de Sousa-Filho et al., 2020; Bacq and Alt, 2018; Tiwari et al., 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to delve into how empathy creates desires in social entrepreneurship, especially in the context of Malaysia.

In the context of social entrepreneurship, there is still limited research investigating this relationship. The pioneer research in this field, Hockerts (2017), found a strong effect of empathy on SEI among second-year students who were enrolled in a Master of Science in Management at a Scandinavian business school. Similarly, a study conducted among entrepreneurs in Germany found that empathy has a positive effect on SEI (Kruse, 2019). Another study among college students taking social venture-related courses in business schools at different universities in South Korea found that empathy has a positive effect on SEI. Serving others' needs comes before one's interests for a social entrepreneur. In light of this justification, academics studying social entrepreneurship contend that empathy is a crucial characteristic that sets social entrepreneurs apart from traditional entrepreneurs and serves as an extra precondition in conventional models of entrepreneurial intent (Kim, 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Empathy has a positive effect on social entrepreneurial intention.

2.3 The Effect of Social Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy on Social Entrepreneurial Intention

Numerous previous studies used self-efficacy as an alternative for perceived behavioral control, whereby both have similar meanings. While Ajzen (1991) used perceived behavioral control, Bandura (1977; 2006) used the term self-efficacy, which refers to the degree to which individuals believe in their capabilities to execute an intended behavior. Previous research findings were consistent that self-efficacy has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention. According to the social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy will determine the career choice of an individual (Bandura, 1977).

According to the social-cognitive theory (SCT), self-efficacy is a key determinant of the career choice of an individual (Bandura, 1977). SCT holds that individuals' self-efficacy, or belief in their capacity to do tasks, drives their actions and career interests. People with strong self-efficacy are more likely to adjust to job demands and actively control their career paths. The current research focuses on how social entrepreneurship self-efficacy influences youth's intentions. Young people with high self-efficacy see social problems as opportunities for innovative solutions rather than as barriers. The belief in their abilities drives social entrepreneurs to take risks and pursue their ventures. Self-efficacy boosts their confidence,

encouraging them to see themselves as change-makers and start enterprises to solve social problems (Hockerts, 2015; 2018)

Christensen et al (2023) found that undergraduate university students' self-efficacy of new product development and opportunity identification and commercialization have a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention. Their study indicates that the higher the confidence to create new products and the ability to identify a business opportunity to commercialize their product, the higher their intention to become an entrepreneur. The findings among business discipline students from two public universities in Bangladesh also found that social self-efficacy is positively related to social entrepreneurial intention (Hossain et al., 2021). In the same vein, Mohammadi et al. (2022) revealed that social entrepreneurship self-efficacy has a positive effect on social entrepreneurial intention. This study was conducted among students in Malaysia from both business and non-business backgrounds who are studying in public and private universities. Another study in Malaysia suggested that among all the independent variables, only self-efficacy was found to have a positive effect on SEI among students in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malaysia (Rozar et al., 2020). These findings aligned with the SCT that individuals' perceptions about themselves hold more importance than their true abilities (Wood & Bandura, 1989). For this reason, if two persons have different levels of self-efficacy, even though they have the same qualities and abilities, their performance may differ. Higher self-efficacy leads to greater interest in social entrepreneurship, especially in tackling challenging social issues where confidence is crucial. Social entrepreneurial self-efficacy refers to the belief that individuals can make a positive impact on society by solving problems. Thus, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H2: Self-efficacy has a positive effect on social entrepreneurial intention.

2.4 The Effect of Perceived Social Support on Social Entrepreneurial Intention

According to the Theory of Planned behavior (TPB), a person's subjective views of how other people perceive a certain action have an impact on their intentions to engage in that behavior. In this study, perceived social support refers to an individual's perception of the availability and sufficiency of support from their social network, including family, friends, organizations, government, and other significant relationships (Hockerts, 2017). It is about how someone feels supported rather than just having support available. As hypothesized by Mair and Noboa (2006) and Hockerts (2017), support from other individuals, organizations, or funders is crucial in determining the intention towards social entrepreneurship. Thus, to further explore this concept, it is vital to examine how this support translates into tangible outcomes in the realm of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship requires specific interventions because it aims to generate profit while positively impacting communities and addressing environmental concerns. This effort demands strong support from all stakeholders, including financial assistance, networking, and capacity building to ensure the sustainability of the social enterprise. Businesses in developing nations, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), need government financial support to boost their ability to compete and perform better (Yusoff et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, the government and its agencies actively assist start-ups and SMEs in

entrepreneurship through various programs and initiatives, such as financial support, human capital development, market access, innovation and technology adoption, and infrastructure (smecorp.gov.my). Empirical evidence shows that this assistance positively influences the youth's intention to become entrepreneurs. Hassan et al. (2020) discovered that university students in Malaysia believe financial support positively influences entrepreneurial intention. In their study, financial support refers to the benefits of being an entrepreneur and the accessibility of funding for their business. Similarly, a study conducted among public university students in Bangladesh revealed that the perceived support from society, including friends, family, government agencies, and social networks, increases the intention toward social entrepreneurship (Akhter et al., 2020). Meanwhile, support from family and friends strongly influences social entrepreneurial intention among participants in Italy. Interestingly, the findings provide empirical evidence that women require more support from friends and family compared to men. (Molino et al., 2018). Thus, the subsequent hypothesis is formulated.

H3: Perceived availability of social support is positively related to social entrepreneurial intention.

2.5 Research Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the research framework of this study. Based on the research objectives and hypotheses, this study has three independent variables: empathy, self-efficacy, and perceived social support, all expected to positively affect social entrepreneurial intention.

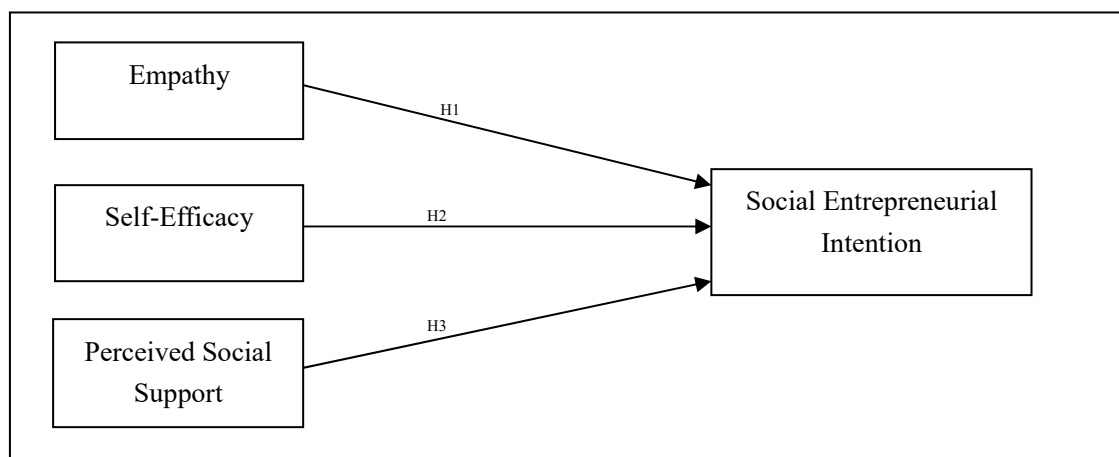


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Method

3.1 Sample Characteristics and Data Collection Method

This study employed a quantitative research survey to achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions. A survey is a popular and common method in business and management research, allowing the collection of a large amount of data from a sizable

population in a highly economical manner. Thus, this study uses a self-administered questionnaire adopted and modified from previous research, as presented in the following subsection. The convenience sampling technique was utilized to collect data from Malaysian youth between the ages of 18 and 30. This study managed to collect 281 questionnaires; however, after data screening for missing data and straight-lining issues, only 250 were usable for further analysis. The sample size exceeds the minimum requirement of 77 samples, as calculated in G*Power software. The data was then analyzed using SEM-PLS (SmartPLS 4.0).

Young people were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, according to a special report by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, social entrepreneurs are typically younger individuals aiming to initiate positive social change (Bosma et al., 2015). Secondly, young people are seen as potential entrepreneurs because they are in their formative years and are uncertain about pursuing paid work or self-employment (Mahmadi et al., 2022). The majority of the respondents were females, with 167 (66.8%) individuals, and only 83 were males (33.2%). In terms of age, 142 (56.8%) were aged between 18 and 20, followed by 95 respondents aged between 21 and 23 (38%). A total of 11 respondents (4.4%) were at the age between 24 and 26. Lastly, two respondents were in the uppermost age range of 27–29 (0.8%). Almost all of the respondents, or 215 (86%), have at least a Diploma, followed by 21 persons (8.4%) who have completed secondary school. Those with bachelor's degrees and master's degrees have almost similar numbers, which are 8 (3.2% and 6 (2.4%), respectively.

3.2 Measurement

The items of the four variables used in this study were adopted and modified from Hockerts (2017) and were measured using 7-point scales ranging from “1=strongly disagree” to “7=strongly agree”.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4, which requires a 2-staged process (Ringle et al., 2022). The first phase assessed the reliability and validity of the data or Measurement Model Assessment to ensure the consistency and stability of the measurement instrument. It is assessed through loading, AVE and composite reliability. Furthermore, validity ensures that the instrument accurately measures the intended theoretical construct through convergent and discriminant validity, demonstrating construct validity. The second stage, which is the Structural Model Assessment, was conducted after the reliability and validity of instruments were established and satisfactory.

4.1 Assessment of Measurement Model

Table 1 and Figure 2 depict the assessment of construct reliability and convergent validity of this study. As illustrated, the composite reliability (CR) values of 0.866 (EM), 0.891 (SE), 0.924 (PS), and 0.820 (SEI) indicate that these constructs possess internal consistency. In terms of convergent validity, all constructs demonstrate adequate convergent validity after removing one item with low loadings (SEI3). Thus, they reach the minimum threshold value of 0.5 for the average variance extracted (AVE), indicating that the items associated with the

respective constructs account for more than 50% of the constructs' variances (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1. Measurement Model for the First Order Constructs

Construct/items	Loading	AVE	CR
Empathy (EM)		0.683	0.866
EM1	0.837		
EM2	0.814		
EM3	0.829		
Social Entrepreneurship Self-Efficacy (SE)		0.731	0.891
SE1	0.868		
SE2	0.880		
SE3	0.815		
Perceived Social Support (PS)		0.803	0.924
PS1	0.917		
PS2	0.921		
PS3	0.848		
Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI)		0.696	0.820
SEI1		0.883	
SEI2		0.782	
SEI3	Deleted		

Source: Authors' Own Work

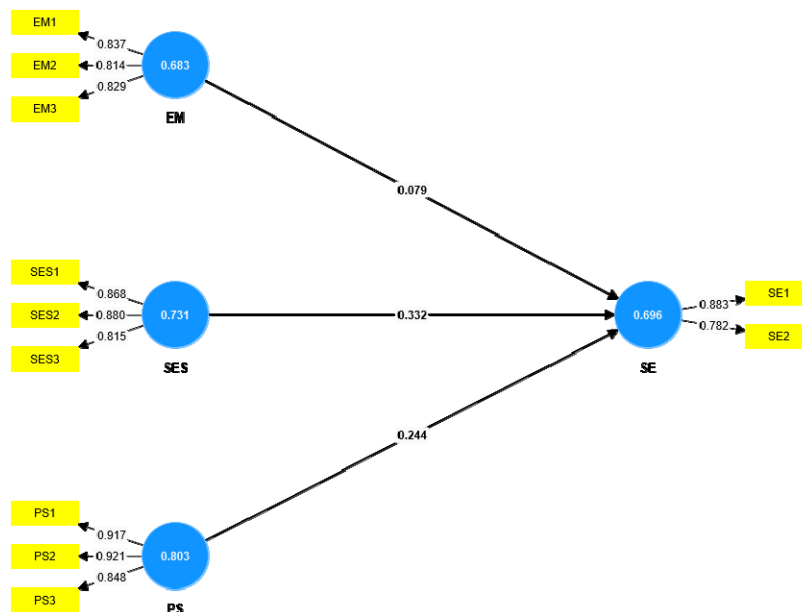


Figure 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 illustrates the evaluation of discriminant validity. This evaluation uses Henseler's heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion (2015), which was updated by Franke and Sarstedt

(2019). Henseler's HTMT criterion, more rigorous than previous standards, indicates that all constructs are distinctly different when the HTMT is ≤ 0.85 . This suggests that respondents perceived the four constructs as separate entities. The results of both validity tests show that the measurement items are valid and reliable.

Table 2: *Discriminant Validity (HTMT)*

Construct	EM	PS	SE	SES
Empathy (EM)				
Perceived Social Support (PS)	0.508			
Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SE)	0.514	0.673		
Social Entrepreneurship Self-Efficacy SES	0.660	0.739	0.754	

Source: Authors' Own Work

4.2 Assessment of Structural Model

Table 3 illustrates the results of path co-efficient assessment using the bootstrapping procedure for the hypothesized relationships. Only two out of three relationships are found significant (Social Entrepreneurship Self-Efficacy \rightarrow SEI, $\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.01$; Perceived Social support \rightarrow SEI, $\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, empathy did not affect SEI.

Table 3. Hypotheses Results

Hypotheses	Direct Effect (β)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	ULCI	LCCI	f ²	Decision
H1: EM \rightarrow SE	0.079	0.065	1.208	0.114	-0.019	0.194	0.007	Not Supported
H2:SES \rightarrow SE	0.332	0.103	3.234	0.001	0.157	0.497	0.085	Supported
H3:PS \rightarrow SE	0.244	0.083	2.921	0.002	0.108	0.381	0.052	Supported

Note. R^2 : 31%

5. Discussion

This study aims to identify the effects of social entrepreneurship self-efficacy (SES), perceived social support (PS), and empathy on social entrepreneurial intention (SEI) among youth in Malaysia. Firstly, for H1, contrary to expectations, empathy did not have a significant effect on SEI. Previous studies show that empathy has a positive effect on SEI, driving the desire to solve societal issues and improve well-being (Hockerts, 2017; Kruse,

2019; Kim, 2022). The insignificant relationship might suggest that while empathy could be an important trait for recognizing social problems and ‘helping behavior’, it may not directly translate into the intention to engage in entrepreneurial activities aimed at solving those problems. According to de Sousa-Filho et al. (2020), Bacq and Alt (2018), and Tiwari et al. (2017), not everyone who has empathy is automatically interested in the idea of a social venture. However, in the context of this study, the findings may suggest that the development of SEI is more strongly influenced by factors related to personal capability and external support rather than emotional attributes. This contradicts the initial proposition by Mair and Noboa (2006), who emphasize the significance of empathy in predicting SEI. The findings of this study reveal new insights; while empathy may not directly influence the intention to become a social entrepreneur, it may require interaction with other factors to strengthen the relationship.

The second hypothesis (H2) of this study is that the relationship between Social Entrepreneurship Self-Efficacy and SEI was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.332, p < 0.01$). This suggests that individuals who have a strong belief in their capabilities to perform tasks related to social entrepreneurship are more likely to express intentions to engage in social entrepreneurial activities. The result aligns with existing literature, which consistently highlights self-efficacy as a critical predictor of entrepreneurial intentions across various contexts (Christensen et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2022; Rozar et al., 2020). The significant positive beta coefficient indicates that youth who believe in their ability to perform social entrepreneurship tasks are more likely to engage in social entrepreneurship. Most previous research suggests that self-efficacy positively influences entrepreneurial intention (Newman et al., 2019), as proposed by the social-cognitive theory.

Finally, for the H3, perceived social support was found to have a significant impact on SEI ($\beta = 0.244, p < 0.01$). This emphasizes the importance of having access to and sufficient support from one's social circle, including family, friends, organizations, government, and other significant connections (Hockerts, 2017) in determining SEI. The finding supports previous literature that individuals perceiving higher support from their social network are more likely to engage in social entrepreneurship (Hassan et al., 2020; Akhter et al., 2020; Molino et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to create a supportive environment and provide resources associated with social entrepreneurship to nurture future social entrepreneurs.

6. Implications

These findings have significant implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the roles of social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and perceived social support highlight the need for cognitive and social network support from family, peers, organizations, and government in forming social entrepreneurial intentions. Meanwhile, from the practical perspective, insights from Malaysian youth emphasize the need to strengthen programs and interventions for social entrepreneurship by focusing on self-efficacy and supportive networks.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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