

A Study of Sexual Debut among Indian Adults: Role of Virginit Beliefs and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The notion of people about virginity or sexual experiences varies from country to country and culture to culture. The cultural expectancies or cultural scripts have an impact on the age at which men and women engage in their first sexual experience. However, the role of virginity beliefs in sexual debut was not yet explored among Indian adults. **Aims:** 1) to explore gender differences in virginity beliefs and age of sexual debut and 2) to study the role of virginity beliefs and gender in predicting age of sexual debut. **Method:** In this study, 151 adults aged 18 to 52 were recruited through snowball sampling methods by sending an invitation to participate in research through social media platforms. The participants provided information about themselves, partner of the first intercourse, and their relationship with them. They had also completed the 22-item 'Virginity Beliefs Scale' developed by Eriksson and Humphreys (2014). **Results:** The results revealed that stigma-related virginity beliefs were higher in Indian men and gift-related virginity beliefs were higher in women as compared with their counterparts. Indian men had an early age of sexual debut than women. Only, gift-based virginity belief was the predictor of sexual debut among Indian adults.

Keywords: *Virginity beliefs, first sex, sexual debut, Indian adults.*

Sex is one of the most natural and important primitive human needs and undoubtedly, it has played a crucial role in human existence. In spite of this, contradictions exist in the way people view 'sex'. People's perception of sex has been influenced by their psychosocial context in which they are living. Factors like education, caretakers' beliefs about sex, social norms, religious values, and individual's moral values do influences people's beliefs about sex. Peoples' beliefs about sex also differ from culture to culture and even within the specific culture. Like in India, the onset of puberty in girls is celebrated in some regions as a cultural ritual; but in most parts, sex is considered a taboo topic, and open discussion on this topic is strictly discouraged. Even the casual meetings of sexually active heterosexual adults are not appreciated; they are not permitted to seat or work together. Even the social, political, economic, and educational changes including advances in technology have failed to bring changes in the way Indians view sex. Dating, premarital sex, casual sex, and homosexual relations are discouraged in Indian society.

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Virginity indicates the status of sexual activeness among sexually mature adults and considered to be the process of becoming an adult. Virginity is highly valued in Indian society; especially, women are expected to be virgins before their marriage. Confirmation and violation of social norms regarding virginity status brings both rewards and punishments. Sexually active unmarried women are bullied and may lose their social status. Even their marriage will be at risk, if their partner comes to know that she was sexually active before or at the time of marriage.

Researchers found that people hold different views about ‘What causes virginity loss?’ Carpenter (2001) and Trotter and Alderson (2007) found that irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual experiences, participants viewed ‘first penile-vaginal penetration’ as an act causing virginity loss. However, significant numbers of participants from other studies believed that ‘oral sex’ (20-40%) and ‘anal sex’ (75-90%) can also lead to virginity loss (Byers et al. 2009; Carpenter, 2001; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). In contrary, Bersamin et al., (2007) found that only 16 percent participants believed that anal sex and oral sex doesn’t cause virginity loss. The findings regarding vaginal and anal intercourse suggest that the act of penetration is a key factor in definitions of sex.

For the present study, the researcher adopted the three-factor model of virginity beliefs proposed by Carpenter (2001, 2005). She studied 61 American heterosexual adults, 33 women and 28 men, from different cultural backgrounds. She found that participants hold three types of cognitive beliefs regarding virginity; namely, gift, stigma, and process. Carpenter observed that people with ‘gift-oriented virginity belief’ value their virginity status, choose their partner carefully. They expect their partner to be virgin at the time of first intercourse and they are likely to engage themselves in safe sex practices compared to people holding ‘process-oriented’ and ‘stigma-oriented’ beliefs about virginity. They not only involved in a long-term dating relationship before their first sexual intercourse but also continue to maintain their relationship with partner for a long time even after the loss of their virginity (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). Eriksson and Humphreys (2014) reported that people with ‘gift-oriented virginity belief’ were less permissive and had fewer lifetime sex partners.

Further, she found that people holding ‘Stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’, feel embarrassed and fear of being labelled as inept due to their virginity status. They prefer to hide their virginity status and try to seek relief from being embarrassed as soon as possible. Their decision of partner selection is influenced by non-emotional factors such as convenience and opportunity rather than emotional factors like romance or love. They are more concerned with their own pleasure and less likely to engage in safe sex practices as they do not wish to put another obstacle in their way of engaging in intercourse (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). They hold more traditional gender role beliefs and sexual double standards (Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014). They are more sexually permissive and agree to have sex for some possible gains (Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014).

In addition, people with ‘Process-oriented virginity beliefs’ consider virginity as a part of the developmental process. They see sexual intercourse as an inevitable part of the development of sexuality, followed by sexual excitement, exploration, and experimentation. They consider the act of participation in sexual intercourse as a means of gaining knowledge and experience about sexuality. They treat sexual intercourse as an opportunity to learn from mistakes than a source of shame. They prefer the older partners and engage in safe sex practices (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). They are sexually more permissive (Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014).

Gender difference in Virginitv Beliefs:

The research focused on beliefs among males and females regarding virginitv revealed that men classified themselves as Stigma Oriented and women as gift oriented (Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014).

Age of Sexual Debut:

In United States of America and United Kingdom, the average age of sexual debut for men and women was 16 years and 17 years, respectively (Hawes et al., 2010; Reissing et al., 2012). On a contrary to this, Humphreys (2013) found that Canadian undergraduate men students reported older age at their first intercourse than women. In another study of 241 college students aged lesser than 35 years, Eriksson and Humphreys (2014) found that the mean age of first sexual intercourse reported by the participant was 16.7 years.

In India, a study conducted on 686 Indian adults selected through stratified random sampling from medical, dental, engineering, Arts, Science, and Polytechnic programs reported that average age of men at the time of first intercourse was 18.3 years (Pradsad, Vinoth Kumar, & Poovitha, 2014). In another study conducted on 257 adolescents from Chandigarh, India the median age of first sexual experience was found to be 16 for males and 15 for females (Lakshmi, Gupta, and Kumar, 2007). The important point to note here is that this study reported earlier sexual debut among Indian females as compared to American and British females which is quite surprising considering the views held by the Indian society about female sexuality. This is also contradictory with the high importance given to virginitv status among females in Indian society. This study reported that Indian females were more likely to engage in sexual acts much earlier before their marriage but they are less likely to verbalize and accept their true virginitv status publicly due to potential negative consequences. There are other studies conducted in India reported even earlier age of sexual debut among Indian (Alexander, Garda, Kanade, Jejeebhoy, & Ganatra, 2006; IIPS & Population Council Youth in India, 2008; Kirby, 2002; Shekhar, Ghosh, & Panda, 2007; Verma, Pulerwitz, Mahendra, Khandekar, Barker, Fulpagare, & Singh, 2006).

The inconsistencies in findings related to the sexual debut among males and females across cultures and countries could be resulted from the differences in sampling method used in the study, sample characteristics and methodology of the study.

Relationship between Virginitv Beliefs and Sexual Debut

The researchers also found a significant positive correlation between all three beliefs about virginitv and age of first intercourse (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). Carpenter (2001, 2005) reported that the process-oriented had the youngest debut compared to stigma-oriented and gift-oriented. The oldest debut was noted among gift-oriented people. However, contrary to this Eriksson and Humphreys (2014) found that virginitv beliefs were not related to the age of first sexual intercourse (Eriksson and Humphreys, 2014).

Why the study is important?

Much of the research on the age of first sexual intercourse focused more on its negative consequences such as sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, poor academic performance (Laffin, Wang, & Barry, 2008) and delinquency (Armour & Haynie, 2007) and its predictors such as gender, education, race, and religiosity. However, the role of cognitive factors as a predictor of first sexual intercourse was not much explored except the work by Carpenter (2001, 2005) and Eriksson and Humphreys (2014) and there was no such study conducted on Indian sample to explore the generalization of three factor model of virginitv

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belief proposed by Carpenter. Further, the finding related to gender differences in sexual debut were inconsistent due to the differences in sample characteristics and research methodology. Similarly, there was lack of consistencies in report on the relationship between virginitly beliefs and age of sexual debut and there was no research conducted in Indian context to explore the relationship between virginitly beliefs and age of sexual debut. Thus, this study was planned to test the model of Virginitly belief proposed by Carpenter (2005) in Indian context. The study was also aimed at exploring the gender differences in virginitly belief and age of sexual debut among Indian adults. The relationship between virginitly beliefs and age of sexual onset was studies to identify the cognitive predictors of sexual debut. It is believed that the findings of this study can be used to plan interventions to prevent negative consequences of early sexual debut among Indian adolescents.

Objectives:

- To study the gender differences in the virginitly beliefs and age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.
- To study the role of virginitly beliefs in predicting the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

Hypotheses

- There will be significant gender differences in the virginitly beliefs of the participants.
- There will be significant gender differences in the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse among the participants.
- Virginitly beliefs will predict the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse of the participants.

Participants

The participants of this study were 151 adults, aged 18 to 52, recruited through the snowball sampling method, from urban and semi-urban parts of eight states of India. Only those participants who agreed that they engaged in a consensual sexual relationship and given consent for participation were included in the final study. Data was collected through online survey method. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Measures

As a part of this study, the participants were asked to complete the personal data sheet and respond to the standard tool developed for measuring the beliefs about virginitly. The personal data sheet was used to collect information about participants gender, age, sexual orientation (Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bi-sexual, & preferred not to say), age at the time of first intercourse, partners age at the time of first intercourse, gender of sexual partner, relationship with the first sexual partner, vaginal sex, anal sex, and oral sex.

Participants also have to respond to the ‘Virginitly Beliefs Scale’ developed by Eriksson and Humphreys (2014) based on the theoretical framework proposed by Carpenter (2002, 2005). This is a 22 items 7-points rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), designed to measure three types of beliefs about virginitly namely, Gift (10 items), Stigma (8 items), and Process (4 items).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 151 adults participated in this research, 66.23% were females (N = 100) and 33.77% (N = 51) were males. There were 84.8% participants with heterosexual orientation (N = 128), 4% with homosexual orientation (N = 6), 6.6% with bi-sexual orientation (N = 10), and 4.6% preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation (N = 7).

Vaginal sex and virginitv Loss: Among these participants, 31.79% believed that vaginal sex doesn't cause virginitv loss. This belief is more prevalent in women (18.54%) than men (13.25%). The data based on sexual orientation (refer to table 1a) revealed that 31.79% of adults from different sexual orientations didn't believe that vaginal sex cause virginitv loss. Heterosexual (32.03%) and bi-sexual adults (30.00%) were more likely hold this belief as compared with homosexual adults (16.67%).

Anal sex and virginitv Loss: 27.15% of participants stated that anal sex can cause virginitv loss. Women (17.22%) were more likely to hold this belief as compared to men (9.93%). Homosexuals (33.33%) compared to heterosexual (26.57%) and bi-sexual (30.00%) more likely to believe that anal sex cause virginitv loss.

Table 1a: Information about beliefs about virginitv loss due to different sexual acts, relationship of first sexual partners and gender of first sexual partner based on the gender of participants (N = 151).

		Gender		
		Male (N =51)	Female (N = 100)	Total
Vaginal Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	31 (20.53%)	72 (47.68%)	103 (68.21%)
	No	20 (13.25%)	28 (18.54%)	48 (31.79%)
Anal Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	15 (9.93%)	26 (17.22%)	41 (27.15%)
	No	36 (23.84%)	74 (49.00%)	110 (72.85%)
Oral Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	6 (3.97%)	15 (9.93%)	21 (13.91%)
	No	45 (29.80%)	85 (56.29%)	130 (86.02%)
Relationship with first sexual partner	Dating Partner	23 (15.23%)	67 (44.37%)	90 (59.60%)
	Friend	22 (14.57%)	8 (5.30%)	30 (19.87%)
	Relative	2 (1.32%)	5 (3.31%)	7 (4.64%)
	Spouse	2 (1.32%)	18 (11.92%)	20 (13.25%)
	Unknown Person	2 (1.32%)	2 (1.32%)	4 (2.65%)
Gender of first sexual partner	Male	0	99 (99.00%)	
	Female	51 (100.00%)	1 (1.00%)	

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Oral sex and virginitv Loss: Women (9.93%) compared to men (3.97%) were almost three times more likely to believe that oral sex can lead to loss of virginitv. People with bi-sexual orientation (30.00%) were more likely to hold belief that oral sex cause virginitv loss than heterosexual (11.26%).

Gender and Choice of First Sexual Partner:

Irrespective of gender, majority of the participants preferred a known person as their first sexual partner i.e. dating partners, friends, spouse, and relatives than unknown person. Preference to dating partners, spouse, and relatives as a partner in first consensual sexual experience was higher in women as compared to males. Choice of a friend as a first sexual partner was higher among men than women. The preference for the familiar persons as their first sexual partners as compared to unknown persons indicates that young adults attempt to avoid emotional distress or ensure emotional comfort and physical security. It seems that the decision was taken cautiously, as the first sexual experience may have a long-lasting impact on their self-esteem, interpersonal relationship, and sexual health.

Sexual Orientation and Choice of First Sexual Partner:

Preference for dating partners was even higher among heterosexual and bisexual persons as compared to homosexual persons. Preference for a friend as a sexual partner in sexual debut was higher among homosexuals as compared to bi-sexual and heterosexuals. Preference to relatives for sexual debut was highest in homosexual persons than, bi-sexual, and heterosexual. This could be due to social norms about acceptable sexual acts due to which heterosexuals have more probable sexual partners available outside their close family as compared to homosexuals. It was noticed that almost all participants had preferred heterosexual partners for their sexual debut. This indicates that even homosexual person realizes their true sexual orientation only after their first sexual encounter.

Table 1b: Information about beliefs about virginitv loss due to different sexual acts, relationship of first sexual partners and gender of first sexual partner based on the sexual orientation of participants (N = 151).

		Sexual Orientation				
		Hetero- sexual (N = 128)	Homo- sexual (N = 6)	Bi- sexual (N = 10)	Prefer Not to Say (N = 7)	Total
Vaginal Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	87 (67.97%)	5 (83.33%)	7 (70.00%)	4 (57.14%)	103 (68.21%)
	No	41 (32.03%)	1 (16.67%)	3 (30.00%)	3 (42.86%)	48 (31.79%)
Anal Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	34 (26.56%)	2 (33.33%)	3 (30.00%)	2 (28.57%)	41 (27.15%)
	No	94 (62.25%)	4 (66.67%)	7 (70.00%)	5 (71.43%)	110 (72.85%)
Oral Sex as a Virginitv Loss	Yes	17 (11.26%)	0	3 (30.00%)	1 (14.29%)	21 (13.91%)
	No	111 (73.51%)	6 (100%)	7 (70.00%)	6 (85.71%)	130 (86.02%)
Relationship with first sexual partner	Dating Partner	78 (60.94%)	2 (33.33%)	6 (60.00%)	4 (57.14%)	90 (59.60%)
	Friend	23 (17.97%)	2 (33.33%)	2 (20.00%)	3 (42.86%)	30 (19.87%)

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	Relative	5 (3.90%)	1 (16.67%)	1 (10.00%)	0	7 (4.64%)
	Spouse	19 (14.84%)	1 (16.67%)	0	0	20 (13.25%)
	Unknown Person	3 (2.34%)	0	1 (10.00%)	0	4 (2.65%)
Gender of first sexual partner	Male	83 (64.84%)	5 (83.33%)	8 (80.00%)	3 (42.86%)	99 (65.56%)
	Female	45 (35.16%)	1 (16.67%)	2 (20.00%)	4 (57.14%)	52 (34.44%)

Table 2: Mean, SD, and N for men and women participants on stigma-oriented, process-oriented and gift-oriented virginity beliefs and age of sexual debut.

	Men			Women			Total		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Stigma-oriented virginity beliefs	20.23	8.30	51	16.61	6.64	100	17.83	7.42	151
Process-oriented virginity beliefs	17.02	4.95	51	16.88	4.74	100	16.93	4.80	151
Gift-oriented virginity beliefs	43.019	11.55	51	48.22	11.82	100	46.46	11.95	151
Age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.	20.18	4.53	51	23.57	4.06	100	22.42	4.51	151

Table 3: ANOVA for Gender as an Independent Variable and Virginity Beliefs and Age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse as Dependent Variables.

Variable	Variance	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial Eta Square
Stigma-oriented virginity beliefs	Gender	443.894	1	443.894	8.455	.004	.054
	Error	7822.966	149	52.503			
	Total	8266.86	150				
Process-oriented virginity beliefs	Gender	.658	1	.658	.028	ns	.000
	Error	3451.54	149	23.165			
	Total	3452.199	150				
Gift-oriented virginity beliefs	Gender	913.409	1	913.409	6.638	.011	.043
	Error	20502.140	149	137.598			
	Total	21415.55	150				
Age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.	Gender	388.952	1	388.952	21.77	.000	.127
	Error	2661.922	149	17.865			
	Total	3050.874	150				

The results of One-way ANOVA revealed that significant gender differences exist on ‘stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’. It was noted that ‘stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’ were higher in men than women. The gender had explained 5.4% of the variance in ‘stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’. This finding was in line with the findings reported by Carpenter (2001, 2005) and Eriksson and Humphrey (2014). Further, the gender differences exist on ‘gift-oriented virginity beliefs’, women compared to men, hold more ‘stigma-oriented

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virginitv beliefs'. For 'stigma-oriented virginitv beliefs', 4.3% of the variance was explained by the gender of the participants. This result found in this study was similar to the results reported by Carpenter (2001, 2005) and Eriksson and Humphrey (2014) in their respective studies. However, there was no significant gender difference observed on 'process-oriented virginitv beliefs'. Thus, the first hypothesis stating that *'there will be significant gender differences exist in the virginitv beliefs of the participants'* was partially accepted.

The gender differences in the virginitv-related cognitive script, especially Stigma and Gift, could be due to differences in 'cultural scripts' regarding sexuality for men and women. The cultural script for men includes the need to have more knowledge and expertise related to sex and for women, it emphasizes that virginitv is a valuable possession that needs to be protected till they find their life partner. Another explanation emphasis the gender differences in approach towards sexuality; the men are more 'pleasure or recreational focused' and women are 'person or relation focused' (DeLamater, 1987).

Significant gender differences ($F(1, 149) = 8.455, p < .01$) were also found related to the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse. The men ($M = 20.18$) reported early age of sexual debut compared to women ($M = 23.57$). The gender had explained 12.7% of the variance in the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse. This result supported the second hypothesis stating that *'there will be significant gender differences exist in the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse among the participants'* was accepted. The results were similar to the findings reported by Hawes et al., (2010) and Reissing et al., (2012). However, the sexual debut in Indian adults was much later than adults from the US and the UK. On the other hand, this finding was contradictory to the findings reported by Humphrey (2013) and Lakshmi, Gupta, and Kumar (2007) which says that males have older sexual onset than females. The sexual onset reported by the participants of this study was much later than the other studies conducted in India. This may due to the differences in sample characteristics among the studies.

Table 4: Correlation between Virginitv Belief and Age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.

	Age of sexual debut/ first sexual intercourse	Stigma-oriented virginitv belief	Process-oriented virginitv belief	Gift-oriented virginitv belief
Age of sexual debut/ first sexual intercourse	1	.043	.043	.274***
Stigma-oriented virginitv belief		1	.307***	.093
Process-oriented virginitv belief			1	.272***
Gift-oriented virginitv belief				1

*** $p < .001$

Table 5: Results of regression analysis with gift as predicting variable and age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse as a criterion variable.

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	R ²	Adjusted R ²
		B	Std. Error	Beta				
Age of sexual debut/ first sexual intercourse	(Constant)	17.617	1.426	.274	10.061	.000	.075	.069
	Gift-oriented virginity belief	.103	.030		3.479	.001		
a. Dependent Variable: Age at the time of first intercourse								

This may be because for men losing virginity at an early age could be the source of prestige and admiration from peers and which may be improving their social status. On the other hand, women might deny or underreport their sexual experiences to protect their social status in society. The social pressure for compliance with social norms about sexuality and fear of rejection may motivate women to hide or manipulate the information about their first sexual experiences.

The results of correlation analysis reported in table 4 revealed that only ‘Gift-oriented virginity belief’ had a significant positive correlation with the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse ($r = .274, p = .001$), whereas ‘stigma-oriented virginity belief’ and ‘process-oriented virginity belief’ did not have any significant relationship with age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse. Thus, the third hypothesis stating that ‘beliefs about virginity will predict the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse of the participants’ was partially accepted. Further, the results of regression analysis reported that ‘gift-oriented virginity belief’ predicted 6.9% of variance in the age of sexual debut/first sexual intercourse.

In addition, it was observed that ‘process-oriented virginity beliefs’ had significant positive relationships ‘stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’ ($r = .307, p=0.001$) and ‘gift-oriented virginity beliefs’ ($r = .272, p=0.001$). However, no relationship was found between ‘gift-oriented virginity beliefs’ and ‘Stigma-oriented virginity beliefs’. Thus, three-factor model of virginity beliefs reported by Carpenter (2002, 2005) is not completely independent and require further research for validation of this model of virginity belief.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Stigma-oriented virginity beliefs were high in men and ‘gift-oriented virginity beliefs’ were high in women.
- Sexual debut of men was earlier than women.
- ‘Gift-oriented virginity beliefs’ were the strong predictor of age of sexual debut.

Limitations of the study:

The limitations of this study includes -

- Overrepresentation of female participants in this study due to which the sample doesn’t become representative of both genders; especially, to conclude about the gender difference in the age of first intercourse.
- Possibility of holding multiple sexual scripts by men and women can’t be ignored.

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- The responses of the participants might be influenced by social desirability.
- Due to the unavailability of tests measuring the virginity belief among Indian adults, the test developed on the western population was used.

Recommendations for future research:

- Cross-sectional and longitudinal methods can be used to explore how virginity belief changes across the different age groups and in the same individual over their lifespan.
- In future research participation of people from the LGBTQ community to study their beliefs about virginity.
- More research is required to assess the cultural validity of the cognitive framework about virginity proposed by Carpenter (2001, 2005) and the scale developed by Eriksson and Humphreys (2014).
- Role of the sociocultural factors in sexual self-disclosure needs to be explored among men and women.
- As the beliefs are shared by the culture, culturally sensitive tests need to be developed and used to assess the virginity beliefs of Indians.
- Participants of this study were mainly from the metropolitan cities of India and the representation of the adults living in rural part is missing. Thus, studies can use probability sampling methods to draw the true representative sample.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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