MSELS Management Systems Evolution and Leadership Studies

VOL. 2 | NO. 2 | 2025

From Managerial Authority to Collective Intelligence: Evolution of Leadership Logic in Modern Organizations

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative model explaining how leadership logic in modern organizations evolves from managerial authority toward collective intelligence. This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory approach. Participants included 24 senior managers, middle managers, team leaders, innovation officers, and human resource specialists working in technology-oriented, knowledge-intensive, and service organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling based on their direct experience with organizational transformation, collaborative decision-making, digital work systems, and leadership development. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, which occurred after the twenty-first interview; three additional interviews were conducted to confirm category stability. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding with the assistance of NVivo software. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review, constant comparison, and maintaining an analytic audit trail. The analysis produced five main categories explaining the evolution of leadership logic: decentralization of managerial authority, emergence of collective sensemaking, digital mediation of intelligence, psychological safety as an enabling condition, and governance of distributed decision-making. The core category was identified as "leadership as the orchestration of collective intelligence." The findings showed that leadership in modern organizations is no longer experienced primarily as command, control, and unilateral decision-making; rather, it is increasingly enacted through facilitation, boundary-setting, knowledge integration, collaborative interpretation, and the activation of dispersed expertise. The study suggests that leadership transformation in modern organizations requires a shift from authority-centered management to intelligence-centered coordination. Effective leaders do not disappear in collective systems; instead, their role changes from controlling people to designing conditions in which collective cognition, shared responsibility, and adaptive action can emerge.

Keywords: managerial authority; collective intelligence; shared leadership; modern organizations; qualitative research; leadership logic; organizational transformation.

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received date: 10 January 2025

Revised date: 10 February 2025

Accepted date: 21 February 2025

Published date: 01 March 2025

HOW TO CITE

Ghorbani, B. & Salimi, F. (2025). From Managerial Authority to Collective Intelligence: Evolution of Leadership Logic in Modern Organizations. *Management Systems Evolution and Leadership Studies,* 2(2), 1-10.

1. Introduction

Leadership theory has historically been shaped by the assumption that organizational effectiveness depends on identifiable individuals who possess authority, vision, decision rights, and influence over followers. Classical organizational models located coordination in hierarchy and formal authority, treating managerial control as the central mechanism through which work could be divided, monitored, standardized, and integrated. In bureaucratic organizations, authority was legitimized through formal rules, role specialization, and clearly defined chains of command. This logic was appropriate for industrial contexts in which organizational environments were relatively

stable, work processes were standardized, and efficiency depended on predictability, compliance, and administrative control (Weber, 1978). Within such contexts, leadership was often conceptualized as a vertical relationship between managers and subordinates, where the manager interpreted goals, allocated resources, evaluated performance, and resolved uncertainty on behalf of the organization.

However, modern organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by complexity, technological disruption, distributed expertise, rapid information flows, and ambiguous strategic problems. In such contexts, authority alone is insufficient for effective leadership because no single manager can possess all the knowledge required to interpret emerging conditions, make timely decisions, and coordinate adaptive responses. Knowledge-intensive work depends on expertise dispersed across individuals, teams, professional communities, digital platforms, and external networks. Consequently, leadership is increasingly understood not merely as the behavior of formal leaders, but as a relational, distributed, and emergent process embedded in collective action (Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002; Raelin, 2016). This shift challenges the traditional image of leadership as control and replaces it with a more dynamic view of leadership as the enabling of shared cognition, coordinated interpretation, and collective problem-solving.

The movement from managerial authority to collective intelligence is closely related to the transition from industrial-age leadership assumptions to knowledge-era leadership requirements. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-producing organizations should not be limited to administrative control; rather, it must enable adaptive dynamics, learning, creativity, and emergent problem-solving within complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). From this perspective, formal leadership remains important, but its function changes. Leaders are expected to create enabling conditions, manage interdependencies, connect diverse actors, and balance administrative order with adaptive emergence. This means that leadership becomes less about producing compliance and more about cultivating the conditions through which organizational members can generate, interpret, and apply knowledge collectively.

Collective intelligence refers to the capacity of groups, networks, or systems to mobilize distributed knowledge and produce outcomes that exceed the capabilities of isolated individuals. Woolley et al. (2010) demonstrated that groups can display a measurable collective intelligence factor that predicts performance across different tasks. Their findings suggest that group intelligence is not reducible to the intelligence of the most capable individual; rather, it depends on interaction quality, participation patterns, social sensitivity, and the distribution of conversational influence. In organizational settings, this insight has important implications for leadership. If collective intelligence depends on how people interact, share knowledge, and coordinate attention, then leadership must increasingly focus on designing interactional and structural conditions that make collective cognition possible.

The concept of collective intelligence also intersects with developments in digital transformation. Modern organizations rely heavily on digital platforms, collaborative technologies, analytics systems, artificial intelligence tools, and data infrastructures that reshape how knowledge is produced and shared. Digitalization changes not only work processes but also leadership expectations. Leaders must coordinate across physical and virtual boundaries, support digital collaboration, interpret data-rich environments, and maintain trust in technologically mediated work systems (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). In such organizations, intelligence is not located exclusively in individual minds or formal managerial roles; it emerges through the interaction of people,

technologies, routines, and organizational networks. Therefore, leadership logic must evolve from directing individuals toward orchestrating socio-technical systems of intelligence.

Shared leadership research provides another foundation for understanding this transformation. Pearce and Conger (2003) defined shared leadership as a dynamic process in which influence is distributed among team members rather than concentrated in a single formal leader. Carson et al. (2007) showed that shared leadership is associated with team performance and is strengthened by internal team environments that support shared purpose, social support, and voice. These findings are especially relevant to modern organizations because complex problems often require contributions from multiple specialists. When leadership influence is distributed, teams can respond more flexibly to changing demands, draw on multiple forms of expertise, and reduce dependence on hierarchical bottlenecks. However, shared leadership does not imply the elimination of formal leadership. Instead, it suggests that formal leaders should cultivate the social and structural conditions under which leadership can be exercised by many actors.

The shift toward collective intelligence also requires psychological safety. Edmondson (1999) introduced psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. This construct is central to collective intelligence because members cannot contribute knowledge, challenge assumptions, admit uncertainty, or question authority if they fear punishment, humiliation, or exclusion. In authority-centered organizations, silence may be interpreted as agreement, while dissent may be treated as resistance. In collective-intelligence-oriented organizations, disagreement, questioning, experimentation, and reflective dialogue become essential resources for learning. Leadership therefore involves reducing fear, legitimizing voice, and creating spaces in which diverse interpretations can be expressed and integrated.

Despite the growing literature on shared leadership, plural leadership, digital leadership, and collective intelligence, less is known about how managers and organizational actors experience the evolution of leadership logic in practice. Existing studies often examine leadership forms separately, while the transition from managerial authority to collective intelligence remains under-theorized as a process of organizational meaning-making. The issue is not simply whether organizations adopt shared leadership practices or collaborative technologies. The deeper question concerns how members reinterpret authority, decision-making, expertise, accountability, and leadership identity when organizational intelligence becomes more distributed. This is particularly important in contexts such as Tehran, where many organizations are simultaneously influenced by hierarchical administrative traditions, competitive market pressures, digital transformation, and increasing demands for innovation.

Modern organizations face a paradox. On the one hand, they need faster, more participatory, and more intelligence-based decision-making. On the other hand, they still require accountability, strategic coherence, ethical oversight, and coordination. If authority is weakened without creating new mechanisms of collective sensemaking, organizations may experience confusion, fragmentation, and responsibility avoidance. Conversely, if hierarchy remains rigid, organizations may suppress knowledge, slow adaptation, and fail to use the intelligence distributed across their members. Therefore, the evolution of leadership logic should not be understood as a simple replacement of hierarchy with participation. Rather, it should be studied as a reconfiguration of leadership, in which managerial authority is transformed into enabling, integrative, and sensemaking-oriented leadership.

This study addresses this theoretical and practical gap by developing a qualitative model of the evolution of leadership logic in modern organizations. By examining the experiences of managers, team leaders, innovation specialists, and human resource professionals in Tehran-based organizations, the study explores how leadership

is reconstructed when authority-centered management encounters the demands of collective intelligence. The purpose of this study was to develop a qualitative model explaining the evolution of leadership logic from managerial authority to collective intelligence in modern organizations.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design to explore how leadership logic evolves from managerial authority toward collective intelligence in modern organizations. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' interpretations, lived organizational experiences, and meaning-making processes rather than test predefined hypotheses. Grounded theory was selected because the research objective involved developing an explanatory model grounded in the perspectives of organizational actors.

The study population consisted of senior managers, middle managers, team leaders, innovation officers, project managers, human resource specialists, and organizational development consultants working in modern, knowledge-intensive, technology-enabled, and service organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling in the initial phase and theoretical sampling in later stages. Inclusion criteria were at least five years of professional work experience, at least two years of managerial or team leadership experience, direct involvement in organizational decision-making or transformation initiatives, and willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Exclusion criteria included lack of direct experience with collaborative work systems, withdrawal of consent, or inability to complete the interview.

A total of 24 participants were interviewed. Theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and conceptual sufficiency of the categories. The sample included 10 senior managers, 6 middle managers, 4 team leaders, 2 human resource specialists, and 2 organizational development consultants. Participants represented organizations in information technology, financial services, consulting, digital services, telecommunications, education technology, and knowledge-based business services.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on the study purpose and the literature on shared leadership, collective intelligence, digital leadership, and organizational transformation. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of leadership change, decision-making practices, authority relations, collaborative problem-solving, use of digital platforms, barriers to participation, and conditions that enabled collective intelligence. Example questions included: "How has the meaning of leadership changed in your organization in recent years?", "What happens when decisions require knowledge that is distributed across several teams?", "How do managers respond when employees challenge managerial assumptions?", and "What conditions help people participate in collective decision-making?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a private and convenient setting, either face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written immediately after each interview to capture contextual impressions, nonverbal cues, emerging analytic ideas, and possible theoretical directions. Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the

study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Codes such as P1, P2, and P3 were used instead of real names.

Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding with the assistance of NVivo software. In the open coding phase, interview transcripts were read repeatedly and meaningful units were identified line by line. Initial codes were assigned to statements related to authority, participation, decision-making, knowledge sharing, leadership identity, trust, digital collaboration, and organizational adaptation. In the axial coding phase, conceptually similar codes were grouped into subcategories and main categories. Relationships among categories were examined through constant comparison across interviews, organizational roles, and participant experiences. In the selective coding phase, the core category was identified and the final qualitative model was developed.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of interpretations. Peer debriefing was used to examine coding decisions and reduce individual researcher bias. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail including interview notes, coding memos, category definitions, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo-writing. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants, organizational context, sampling criteria, and analytic procedures.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that 24 individuals participated in the study. In terms of gender, 14 participants were men and 10 were women. Regarding age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 8 were between 36 and 40 years old, 7 were between 41 and 45 years old, and 4 were above 45 years old. In terms of education, 6 participants held bachelor's degrees, 14 held master's degrees, and 4 held doctoral degrees. Regarding organizational position, 10 participants were senior managers, 6 were middle managers, 4 were team leaders, 2 were human resource specialists, and 2 were organizational development consultants. Work experience ranged from 7 to 24 years, with 6 participants having 7–10 years of experience, 9 participants having 11–15 years, 5 participants having 16–20 years, and 4 participants having more than 20 years of experience. The diversity of participants helped capture different perspectives on the transformation of leadership logic in Tehran-based modern organizations.

The analysis led to the identification of five main categories: decentralization of managerial authority, emergence of collective sensemaking, digital mediation of intelligence, psychological safety as an enabling condition, and governance of distributed decision-making. The core category was "leadership as the orchestration of collective intelligence."

The first main category was decentralization of managerial authority. Participants explained that leadership in modern organizations had gradually moved away from command-based authority and toward facilitative coordination. In traditional structures, managers were expected to know, decide, instruct, and control. However, participants stated that this model had become increasingly ineffective in environments where knowledge was dispersed among experts, teams, and digital systems. Managers described a growing awareness that their authority did not automatically produce better decisions. Instead, authority had to be used to open decision spaces, invite expertise, and remove barriers to participation. One senior manager stated, "In the past, people waited for the manager to say the final word. Now, if I say the final word too early, I may destroy the best ideas in the room"

(P4). Another participant noted, “The manager is still responsible, but responsibility no longer means deciding alone. It means making sure the right people are involved before the decision is made” (P11). This category shows that authority was not eliminated; rather, it was redefined as an enabling function.

The second main category was emergence of collective sensemaking. Participants emphasized that organizational problems had become too ambiguous to be interpreted through individual managerial judgment alone. They described leadership as a process of bringing different perspectives together to construct a shared understanding of problems before moving toward action. Collective sensemaking occurred in cross-functional meetings, project reviews, digital discussion spaces, crisis response sessions, and informal knowledge-sharing interactions. Participants reported that modern leadership required the ability to ask better questions, synthesize conflicting interpretations, and help teams develop a common language. One team leader explained, “The biggest change is that leadership starts before the decision. It starts when we try to understand what the problem really is” (P7). Another participant said, “Sometimes the marketing team sees the customer problem, the technical team sees the system limitation, and finance sees the cost risk. Leadership is connecting these views, not choosing one too quickly” (P16). This category indicates that leadership logic evolved from decision authority to interpretive integration.

The third main category was digital mediation of intelligence. Participants reported that digital platforms, dashboards, collaborative software, data analytics, and communication tools had changed how knowledge circulated in organizations. These technologies allowed employees to access information faster, document decisions, share expertise across units, and participate in problem-solving beyond formal meetings. However, participants also warned that technology alone did not create collective intelligence. Digital tools could either support collaboration or intensify information overload, surveillance, and fragmented attention. One participant stated, “We have more data than before, but data does not think for us. The important thing is how people interpret it together” (P2). Another interviewee noted, “Our platform made participation visible. People who were silent in meetings started writing useful comments online” (P19). Participants described digital mediation as a double-edged condition: it expanded the organization’s cognitive capacity but required leadership practices that transformed data into shared understanding.

The fourth main category was psychological safety as an enabling condition. Participants consistently argued that collective intelligence could not emerge in a climate of fear. Employees were unlikely to challenge managerial assumptions, share incomplete ideas, report mistakes, or express alternative interpretations if they expected negative consequences. Participants described psychological safety as a practical leadership condition rather than an abstract cultural value. It was created when managers listened without punishment, welcomed disagreement, admitted their own uncertainty, and separated criticism of ideas from criticism of persons. One human resource specialist stated, “When people think disagreement is dangerous, the organization becomes blind. Everyone sees the problem, but no one says it” (P13). Another participant said, “The best meetings are not the ones where everyone agrees. The best meetings are where people can disagree and still feel respected” (P21). This category shows that the transition from authority to collective intelligence depends on emotional and relational conditions that legitimize voice.

The fifth main category was governance of distributed decision-making. Participants stressed that collective intelligence did not mean disorder, leaderlessness, or endless participation. Instead, distributed decision-making required clear boundaries, decision rules, role clarity, accountability mechanisms, and escalation pathways.

Participants noted that when organizations encouraged participation without defining how decisions would be made, employees became frustrated and responsibility became unclear. Effective leadership therefore involved designing governance mechanisms that balanced participation with coherence. One senior manager explained, “If everything is collective, nothing moves. We need to know which decisions are consultative, which are shared, and which must remain executive” (P5). Another participant stated, “Collective intelligence needs structure. Otherwise, it becomes collective confusion” (P18). This category indicates that the evolution of leadership logic requires a new form of disciplined participation, where authority and collective input are integrated rather than treated as opposites.

The core category, “leadership as the orchestration of collective intelligence,” integrates the five main categories. The findings suggest that modern leadership is not simply a movement from hierarchy to participation. Rather, it is a transformation in the function of leadership. Leaders become orchestrators who activate distributed expertise, create psychologically safe spaces, mediate digital knowledge flows, support collective interpretation, and establish governance structures for shared decision-making. In this model, managerial authority is not abolished; it is converted into the capacity to design conditions for collective intelligence.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that leadership logic in modern organizations is evolving from authority-centered control toward the orchestration of collective intelligence. The first finding concerned decentralization of managerial authority. Participants indicated that managerial authority remains necessary, but its meaning has changed. Authority is no longer perceived primarily as the right to command; instead, it is increasingly understood as the responsibility to enable participation, mobilize expertise, and create conditions for effective collective action. This finding aligns with complexity leadership theory, which argues that leadership in knowledge-era organizations must enable adaptive dynamics rather than rely solely on administrative control (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It is also consistent with Raelin’s (2016) leadership-as-practice perspective, which shifts attention from individual leaders to the social practices through which leadership is produced. In the present study, participants did not reject formal leadership; rather, they reinterpreted it. Formal managers were still expected to preserve accountability and strategic direction, but they were also expected to avoid premature closure, invite distributed expertise, and transform authority into an enabling architecture. This supports the idea that modern leadership is not post-managerial in the sense of eliminating managers; it is post-authoritarian in the sense of reducing dependence on unilateral control.

The second finding concerned the emergence of collective sensemaking. Participants emphasized that modern organizational problems are often ambiguous, cross-functional, and unstable; therefore, they must be interpreted collectively before they can be solved. This finding is consistent with the literature on plural leadership, which suggests that leadership may emerge through the combined influence of multiple actors in complex organizational situations (Denis et al., 2012). It also corresponds with shared leadership theory, where influence is distributed among team members and leadership becomes a collective process rather than a fixed individual role (Pearce & Conger, 2003). The participants’ emphasis on problem interpretation is important because it shows that collective intelligence begins before decision-making. It begins when organizational members bring different forms of knowledge into conversation and construct a shared understanding of what the issue means. This finding extends

previous research by suggesting that the evolution of leadership logic involves a cognitive shift: leaders are valued less for having immediate answers and more for creating interpretive spaces in which answers can emerge through interaction.

The third finding concerned digital mediation of intelligence. Participants explained that digital platforms, data systems, collaborative technologies, and dashboards had expanded the organization's capacity to collect, store, and circulate knowledge. However, they also stressed that digital tools do not automatically produce collective intelligence. This finding aligns with Cortellazzo et al. (2019), who argued that leadership in a digitalized world requires the ability to build relationships across dispersed stakeholders and develop collaborative processes in technologically mediated environments. It also relates to Malone et al.'s (2010) view of collective intelligence systems as designed arrangements in which people and technologies combine to accomplish tasks. The present study shows that digital infrastructure can make intelligence more visible and accessible, but leadership remains necessary to transform information into interpretation and interpretation into coordinated action. Without leadership practices that encourage dialogue, filtering, ethical use, and collaborative interpretation, digital systems may produce overload rather than intelligence. Thus, modern leadership should be understood as socio-technical orchestration, not merely human influence.

The fourth finding concerned psychological safety as an enabling condition for collective intelligence. Participants repeatedly stated that people do not contribute their knowledge fully when they fear criticism, punishment, or status loss. This finding strongly supports Edmondson's (1999) theory of psychological safety, which identifies interpersonal risk-taking as essential for learning behavior in teams. It also reinforces Woolley et al.'s (2010) findings that collective intelligence depends partly on interaction quality and participation patterns rather than only on individual intelligence. In authority-centered cultures, silence may be mistaken for alignment, while obedience may be mistaken for effectiveness. The present study suggests that such silence can weaken organizational intelligence by preventing weak signals, dissenting views, and experiential knowledge from entering the decision process. Therefore, leaders who seek collective intelligence must actively reduce fear, normalize disagreement, and protect voice. Psychological safety is not simply a desirable cultural feature; it is a structural condition for the production of collective cognition.

The fifth finding concerned governance of distributed decision-making. Participants warned that collective intelligence should not be confused with unrestricted participation or leaderless decision-making. They emphasized the need for decision rules, role clarity, accountability, and boundaries. This finding is important because it prevents an overly romantic interpretation of collective leadership. Shared and distributed leadership can improve adaptability, but without governance they may also create ambiguity, delay, conflict, and responsibility diffusion. Carson et al. (2007) showed that shared leadership is strengthened by supportive internal team conditions, but the present study adds that shared leadership also requires explicit decision architecture. In this sense, collective intelligence depends on the integration of openness and structure. Leaders must define when participation is consultative, when it is collaborative, and when final authority is required. This finding also aligns with complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes the tension between administrative order and adaptive emergence (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Effective modern leadership is therefore not the abandonment of authority, but the intelligent redesign of authority.

Overall, the findings suggest that the evolution from managerial authority to collective intelligence is a transformation in leadership logic rather than a simple change in leadership style. Traditional leadership logic

asks: Who has the authority to decide? Collective intelligence logic asks: How can the organization mobilize the knowledge needed to decide well? This shift changes the meaning of leadership competence. Leaders must become facilitators of sensemaking, designers of participation, guardians of psychological safety, interpreters of digital information, and governors of distributed decision processes. The study therefore contributes to leadership theory by integrating shared leadership, complexity leadership, collective intelligence, and digital leadership into a single qualitative model. It also contributes to organizational practice by showing that collective intelligence requires both cultural and structural foundations. Participation without trust becomes symbolic; digital tools without interpretation become noise; shared decision-making without governance becomes confusion; and authority without openness becomes a bottleneck.

The main limitation of this study is its qualitative design and contextual focus. The participants were selected from Tehran-based modern organizations, and although they represented different sectors and managerial levels, the findings may not be directly generalizable to all organizational settings. The study relied on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by participants' interpretations, memory, organizational position, and desire to present their organizations in a favorable way. In addition, because the study focused on managers, team leaders, and organizational specialists, it may not fully capture the experiences of frontline employees or external stakeholders. Future studies may address these limitations by including broader participant groups and comparing different organizational cultures.

Future research should test and extend the proposed qualitative model in different organizational contexts, industries, and national settings. Quantitative studies can develop and validate measurement instruments for the main dimensions identified in this study, including authority decentralization, collective sensemaking, digital mediation, psychological safety, and distributed decision governance. Mixed-methods research can examine how these dimensions affect innovation, employee engagement, decision quality, organizational agility, and performance. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how leadership logic evolves over time, especially during digital transformation, crisis management, organizational restructuring, or the implementation of artificial intelligence systems.

From a practical perspective, organizations should not treat collective intelligence as a spontaneous outcome of teamwork or technology adoption. Managers need training in facilitation, dialogic leadership, conflict management, data interpretation, and participatory decision design. Organizations should create formal mechanisms for cross-functional sensemaking, such as structured decision forums, collaborative strategy sessions, after-action reviews, and digital knowledge-sharing platforms. At the same time, leaders should establish clear rules for accountability and decision rights so that participation does not become ambiguity. Most importantly, organizations should build psychological safety by rewarding constructive dissent, protecting employee voice, and encouraging managers to admit uncertainty. These practices can help organizations transform managerial authority into a platform for collective intelligence.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

Acknowledgments

Authors thank all who helped us through this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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