



Reflections on Sustainable Consumption in the Context of COVID-19

Krystal M. Perkins^{1†}, Luis Velazquez^{2†} and Nora Munguia^{2,3*†}

¹ Psychology, School of Natural and Social Sciences, Purchase College, State University of New York, Purchase, NY, United States, ² Industrial Engineering, University of Sonora, Hermosillo, Mexico, ³ Sustainability Graduate Program/Industrial Engineering, University of Sonora, Hermosillo, Mexico

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*Correspondence:

Nora Munguia
nora.munguia@unison.mx

[†]These authors have contributed equally to this work and share first authorship

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The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly disrupted progress toward many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Accordingly, the UN has underscored the need to design short-term responses to halt and reverse the adverse effects of the current COVID-19 crisis. However, some researchers have scrutinized the feasibility and note the potential counterproductivity of particular SDGs in our post-pandemic world. This perspective paper holds a more hopeful outlook and contends that the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to prompt efforts to carry out the UN's 2030 Agenda. In this regard, this paper engages the theme of "sustainable consumption" in the context of COVID-19 by discussing two perspectives or bodies of work—supply chain sustainability and post-colonial theory. Supply chain sustainability is discussed as one such promising, though underutilized practice, that could potentially catalyze progress toward SDG 12. Likewise, post-colonial theory, a body of knowledge rarely drawn upon in sustainable consumption and SDG conversations, is presented to call attention to some of the gaps in the orthodoxy of sustainable consumption approaches, practices, and theoretical perspectives. This perspective paper's novelty lies in the fact that it calls attention to the promise of the SDGs and the limits of our current theoretical frameworks related to sustainable consumption. For these reasons, these bodies of work can provoke additional questions and avenues for future research.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, COVID-19, supply chain sustainability, post-colonial theory, unsustainability, SDG12

INTRODUCTION

On December 8, 2020, the United Kingdom started to administer the first COVID-19 vaccine (Reynolds et al., 2020), and about 1 week later, the COVID-19 vaccination program began in the United States of America (BBC, 2020). On par with these extraordinary advances, the World Health Organization is also collaborating with governments, scientists, and business around the world through the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT)-Accelerator partnership to speed up COVID-19 responses and facilitate equitable access to the vaccine among all countries (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). Alongside these advances, however, the pandemic has abruptly disrupted the progress of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDGs marked the year 2030 as the target date for thwarting major global and social environmental crises. A key aim of the Agenda 2030 is the Sustainable Development Goal 12 that states: "to ensure sustainable

consumption and production practices necessarily entails to respect the biophysical boundaries of the planet and to reduce current global consumption rates in order to fit with the biophysical capacity to produce ecosystem services and benefits” [United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), 2020].

The UN has underscored the imperious need to design short-term responses to halt and reverse the adverse effects of the current COVID-19 crisis [United Nations (UN), 2020]. However, many researchers have scrutinized whether the SDGs are feasible in the COVID-19 world, and some have posited that particular SDGs might be ineffectual and even counterproductive (Naidoo and Fisher, 2020). The research team holds a more hopeful outlook and contends that the COVID-19 pandemic can prompt efforts to carry out the UN’s 2030 Agenda. This paper engages the theme of “sustainable consumption” in the context of COVID-19. Specifically, two perspectives or bodies of work are discussed—supply chain sustainability and post-colonial theory. As will be elaborated on below, supply chain sustainability is discussed as one such promising, though underutilized practice, that could potentially catalyze progress toward SDG 12. Likewise, post-colonial theory, a body of knowledge rarely “put to use” in sustainable consumption and SDG conversations, is presented to call attention to some of the gaps in the orthodoxy of sustainable consumption approaches and practices. This perspective paper’s novelty lies in the fact that it calls attention to the promise of the SDGs and the limits of our current theoretical frameworks related to sustainable consumption. Likewise, this paper is rooted in the generative potentiality of critique and reflection, which is often given less weight in scholarship (Peritz, 1983). For these reasons, these bodies of work can provoke additional questions and avenues for future research. This article is structured as follows: the first section reports on supply chain sustainability, followed by a discussion of post-colonial theory. Each section reflects on sustainable consumption in the post-COVID era.

CONSUMPTION AND SUPPLY CHAIN DISPLACEMENT

Without ignoring the fact that the pandemic has adversely affected the lives of people all over the world, one of the most promising COVID-19 developments, as it relates to sustainable consumption, is the pandemic’s effect on household consumption patterns (Blundell et al., 2020). People consumed less and people consumed differently. This behavior led to exponential shifts in energy demand and supply chain infrastructures (Schaltegger, 2020). Some general trends are now known about the change in consumption patterns during the pandemic. When the pandemic began, the widespread fear of COVID-19’s consequences, namely death, and anxiety of illness, led to panic buying at supermarkets for stockpiling (Naeem, 2020). After the 1st months of the pandemic, one of the most visible indicators of consumer behavior change was adopting cautious approaches in buying habits (Mehta et al., 2020). For example, people limited their major purchases to items that fulfilled basic needs (Hobbs, 2020) and avoided unnecessary purchases of luxury goods (Tuncer, 2020). Lockdowns also discouraged going-out,

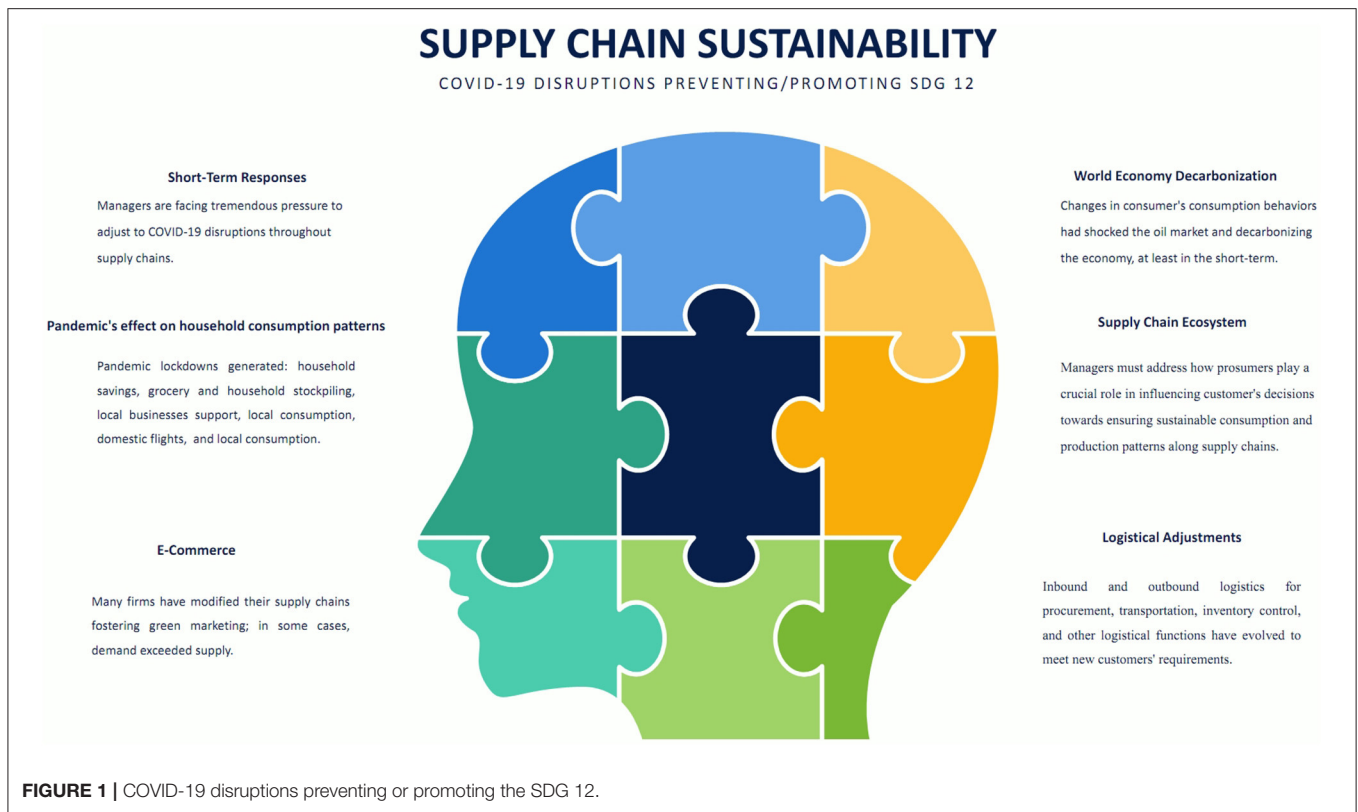
but online shopping continued, implying a strong desire for consumption (Briggs et al., 2020).

Similarly, people traveled less. In 2020, the airline industry suffered a significant drop in passenger air transport demand, threatening many airlines’ viability, especially international travel, because passengers perceived a heightened risk than domestic flight routes (Forsyth et al., 2020; Matiza, 2020). Although it is remarkable that COVID-19 led to a decrease in consumption and decarbonized the world economy (Perkins et al., 2021), these new consumption patterns occurred against the backdrop of the millions that lost their jobs and, as a consequence, drastically affected world economies (Duffin, 2020).

As a consequence of the change mentioned above in consumer’s consumption behaviors, there have been unprecedented changes to many supply chains. For instance, the sudden increase in medical-related product demand resulted in massive out-of-stocks items (Anholon and Rampasso, 2020). In the agricultural and food industries domain, supply chains were also disrupted by current consumption patterns (Kerr, 2020). Likewise, the actual demand for fresh food on e-commerce platforms surpassed suppliers’ capacity to deliver (Hao et al., 2020). In response, supply chains adjusted to these new conditions, but not without problems. There were price increases, shortage of supplies, and general logistic system issues (Guo et al., 2020). According to Free and Hecimovic (2020), many disruptions will continue to be present for producers and consumers up and down supply chains. In the best-case scenario, the overall effects will be transitory from an economic approach (Wang et al., 2020). Still, it is expected that while the pandemic lasts, more disruptions in supply chains and across industries are likely to occur. Supply chain sustainability, discussed in the next section, is a promising, though underutilized practice that can limit the challenges imposed on supply chains by the COVID-19 pandemic, doing it in a sustainable way, and catalyze progress toward SDG 12.

SUPPLY CHAIN SUSTAINABILITY AND SDG 12

In times of crisis, consumer behavior changes and other stakeholder requirements often undermine business sustainability performance (Hossan-Chowdhury and Quaddus, 2021). While this is a specific case concerning COVID-19, the pandemic has also brought forward the importance of sustainability being integrated into supply chain design and built into long-term business resilience. Business resilience refers here to a firm’s capacity to resume operations as quickly and effectively as possible after being shocked by an unexpected event of any nature (Rajesh, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has tested business resilience, and more efforts need to be made to make supply chains more adaptable by incorporating sustainability-oriented strategies into corporate sustainability. Some firms, for example, have responded by reengineering their inbound and outbound logistics for procurement, transportation, inventory control, and other logistical functions to meet new customers’ sustainability requirements, such as the growing demand for



safety and health during the shopping experience (Mollenkopf et al., 2020).

Some promising new recent research also posits that firms that look toward sustainability-oriented strategies can strengthen supply chain competitiveness in the long run (Febransyah and Goni, 2020). Accordingly, firms can potentially build business resilience by internally carrying out sustainability strategies throughout all supply chain stages (Lopes de Sousa Jabbour et al., 2020). Companies located upstream and downstream across the entire supply chain are allocating considerable resources to integrate and implement methodologies, techniques, tools, standards, and policies to implement and evaluate initiatives that foster the importance of sustainable supply chain management (Deng et al., 2020). Furthermore, associating with external stakeholders during the COVID-19 crisis may result in a transition to further supply chain sustainability because it fosters local markets, build community trust, reduces risk, and build resilience (Sarkis, 2020).

Sustainability through the supply chain is not only the responsibility of firms but also the responsibility of consumers. The COVID-19 forced consumers to modify their previous consumer behaviors that disrupted unsustainable supply chains. However, when the pandemic ends, it is unknown whether consumers will continue to consume less and consume differently. Consideration should be given to building a dyadic interaction between firms and consumers to enable environmentally responsible consumption (Kumar and Dholakia, 2020). For instance, due to the COVID-19 measures, including mobility restrictions and home office

schemes, global electricity consumption patterns and levels have decreased [International Energy Agency (IEA), 2020]. As costumers, if we decide to keep our energy consumption at actual levels, firms will be forced to undertake sustainable strategies to satisfy new sustainability demands. This idea calls for an interactive and collaborative relationship among consumers and producers to co-create sustainability throughout supply chains (Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020). Before COVID-19, the figure of prosumers or proactive consumers who participate in a firm's activities had emerged as a positive driver for helping firms engage with their stakeholders to improve organizational performance. In these unprecedented times, prosumers could have a more extensive influence in society, more broadly, by influencing society's consumption (Lang et al., 2020). It is difficult to predict at this stage how prosumers will behave during the following months or years toward supply chain sustainability operations. Still, in any case, it is expected they can help to promote supply chain sustainability. **Figure 1** shows how COVID-19 disruptions preventing or promoting the SDG 12.

COLONIALISM AND THE MAKING OF UNSUSTAINABILITY

"The climate crisis is not just about the environment. It is a crisis of human rights, of justice, and of political will. Colonial, racist, and patriarchal systems of oppression have created and fueled it. We need to dismantle them all (Thunberg et al., 2019)."

The subsequent emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic diffused public debate where economic growth was prioritized over sustainability. As captured by the opening epigraph, this section of the paper aims to put forth a theoretical interruption to this public debate by considering and taking seriously global climate change and sustainable consumption through an anti-colonial lens. Specifically, this section of the paper engages in de-colonial environmentalism and other related post-colonial theories, which explain environmental degradation and unsustainable practices as arising from colonial projects of modernity and expansion rooted in the Western cultural imaginary (Gallegos, 2015). The main argument here is that future sustainable consumption conversations in our COVID-19 world must *decenter* the idea that the anthropometric causes of climate change and unsustainability seemingly appeared out of nowhere and instead *center* anthropometric causes and unsustainability through interlocking material practices of colonialism. Furthermore, the research team proposes that a de-colonial imagination is a key to sustainable and responsible consumption in our COVID-19. The following sections elaborate on these points.

There are many ways to describe colonialism-European exploration, geographical occupation, appropriation of land, erasure of indigenous knowledge, etc. (Wolfe, 2002). Hence, colonialism is not monolithic, but consists of distinct, yet overlapping manifestations, stages, and strategies. Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of these diverse expressions, but all start with Patrick Wolfe's (2002) premise that colonialism is "a structure, not an event (p. 2)" and *remains* an enduring force. Said (1979) also distinguishes imperialism and colonialism, where imperialism is the theory and practice of a dominating metropole ruling distant colonies, and colonization is its effects. Across these colonial spaces, colonialism is a business enterprise involving the extraction of land, resources, and labor for profit. The indigenous inhabitants in these colonies were/are removed or used as workforces to be subjugated and oppressed.

Environmental devastation and unsustainable practices are inseparable from colonial domination. Drayton (2005) explains that the expansion of these metropolises was also an *ecological* campaign of subjection, control, and exploitation. Similarly, Crosby's (2004) seminal text, "Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900," advanced the idea that colonization was simultaneously cultural, political, and environmental tyranny. Crosby further argues that colonialism's ecological dimensions were primary because colonists brought diseases, invasive pests, and weeds that devastated local populations. Following Crosby, scholars from the Global South have used colonialism as a theoretical lens to the question of environment and unsustainability. Weizman and Sheikh's (2015) work, for example, extends Crosby's (2004) premise that unsustainability and environmental devastation was the stated goal of colonialism. Scholars have also chronicled how the system of slavery in the United States occurred alongside the calamitous alteration of pasturage and forestry into closed, extractive for-profit plantations (Haraway et al., 2016). Likewise, within the context of French occupation in the Caribbean, Ferdinand et al.

(2020) asserts that colonialism was based on a particular way of inhabiting the earth, namely a violent unsustainable form that exploited lands, humans, and non-humans. It is what Ferdinand et al. (2020) calls "colonial habitation," similar to Maldonado-Torres (2007) concept of "coloniality of being."

A DE-COLONIAL IMAGINING AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

These legacies of colonialism have implications for how unsustainability is understood. In particular, the colonial era is fundamental to understanding our contemporary challenges concerning sustainable consumption and implies more complex mitigation efforts. Weizman and Sheikh (2015) elucidates: "the current acceleration of climate change is not only an unintentional consequence of industrialization. The climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continually acted to engineer it." Accordingly, the global climate crisis and our unsustainable practices that created that crisis are narrating this colonial story. Hence, the first step to sustainable consumption is acknowledging this colonial story, toward a de-colonial imaging. A foremost mechanism of colonial domination is epistemic violence via the repression of particular representations of history (Fals-Borda, 2013). The recovery of this colonial story can counteract this imposed repression and raise awareness of viable alternatives to the current status quo.

Facing up to that colonial story also means acknowledging colonial histories of extraction that have been spatially and racially distributed. Unsustainability practices disproportionately affect communities of color [United Church of Christ-Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ), 1987; Lee, 2019]. Many studies have documented how minority groups—suffer disproportionately from a slew of systemic environmental threats. The landmark study, "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States (1987)," found race to be the single most determining factor in predicting the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. Likewise, the newer report, "Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty, 1987–2000: Grassroots Struggles to Dismantle Environmental Racism in the United States (Bullard et al., 2007)," shows that no progress has been made in 20 years. Furthermore, poorer countries in the Global South (and many former colonies) with very low carbon footprints bear the burden of unsustainability from wealthier countries in the Global North (Hickel, 2020). Accordingly, race and racism are at the crux of this moment: COVID-19 impacts people of color exponentially in large part because unsustainability policies and practices described above cause air pollution and lead to conditions like asthma, making a person more likely to suffer the worst of the virus [Center of Disease Control Prevention (CDC), 2020]. To this end, framing unsustainability as a problem that affects all people in equal measures and sustainability as the responsibility of all people in similar ways needs to be re-imagined. Agyeman (2008) proposes a "just" sustainability framing, that attaches issues of race, class, justice, and equity to sustainability and unsustainability.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it evident the need to decolonize mainstream knowledge production regarding sustainable consumption. For example, some researchers have posited that it will not be possible to achieve the SDGs when the structures that create and maintain poverty, inequality, and unsustainable development are upheld (Gallegos, 2015; Menton et al., 2020; Naidoo and Fisher, 2020). Specifically, Gallegos (2015) argues that one of the reasons that efforts to limit anthropometric causes and unsustainability have been limited is because sustainability approaches do not pose a challenge to how we currently conceptualize nature, what Rozzi (2012) calls “a colonial conception of nature” and do not definitively depart from the business enterprise of colonialism described earlier. For example, sustainable consumption advocates largely dismiss strong sustainability as a viable way of life and instead advocate a weak sustainability framework where there is a reliance on the *management* of limited resources and consumption is reduced just to the level of sustainability, thereby sustaining the status quo in terms of an unsustainable way of life (Daly, 1996; Ang and Van Passel, 2012). To be sure, these approaches advocate essential changes, but do not necessitate an inherently robust ethical and de-colonial position. In contrast, a de-colonial frame insists that people’s way of life, the activity of consumption, and our relationship to nature should all be ethical and decolonial matters. A strong body of work in cultural and liberation psychologies problematizes these universalizing discourses through a recognition of the values of marginalized perspectives (e.g., the Global South, formerly colonized spaces) to “work out new concepts” (Fanon, 1965, p. 316) and to de-ideologize conventional knowledge production in the context of sustainable consumption (Martín-Baró, 1994).

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 drastically shifted the landscape of sustainable consumption. The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribe (ECLAC) notes our civilization is at a crossroads where it is possible to take the path toward a different future (ECLAC, 2020). There is no doubt that the COVID-19 is marking a before and an after for humankind and has put the value of responsible consumption into sharper focus than ever before. In recent months, there has been an increase in published material on the effects of COVID-19 on a diversity of sustainability issues. Characterized by an exceptional level of uncertainty and extensive debate, sustainability researchers have to adapt to new research routines described by access to knowledge through information technology (Leal et al., 2020). So far, none can accurately predict the long-lasting effects of the nature of COVID-19 related to humankind’s future and much less to Agenda 2030 and SDG 12. Still, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2020), COVID-19 could act as a catalyzer that speeds up the progress toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. As the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on sustainable consumption evolve, it remains to be seen

whether the few-current favorable effects on the environment will last. The real test of sustainable consumption will come after the COVID-19 vaccine has been widely distributed and some semblance of normalcy is established. When that day arrives, the sustainable consumption community and the broader public must utilize the changes that the COVID-19 brought as tangible examples of what can be achieved from a sustainable consumption perspective.

This perspective paper urges for practices like sustainability business resilience and supply chain sustainability to be the norm, rather than the exception. It is essential to realize that the COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly disrupted progress toward many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDG 12 has probably been one of the most affected due to the disruptions caused to sustainability practices because of the changing consumption patterns along the entire supply chain. Sustainable consumption and production will not be possible by 2030 if the industry is stretched beyond its resilience capacity. Therefore, the question is not whether the change will be radical, but the influence of such changes on the firm’s corporate sustainability. While it is unknown how long current conditions will last, managers should adapt as soon as possible to this new way of doing business during the post-COVID-19 era. It is difficult to predict at this stage how prosumers/consumers will behave during the following months or years toward sustainable consumption. Still, it is expected online commerce will keep ruling the market because of the fear of coronavirus. In response to the COVID-19 turbulence, managers must seize the initiative in implementing supply chain sustainability practices and adjust to the new reality. As mentioned above, there are already several examples of sustainability firm’s adjustments in procurement, transportation, inventory control, and other logistical functions as a response to COVID-19. Although the selection and effectiveness of those sustainability practices depend on each industry sector’s circumstances, prosumers would play a crucial role in influencing customer’s decisions for ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns across supply chains toward reaching the SDG 12.

Likewise, how coloniality and colonial process intersect with unsustainability are foundational to understanding sustainable consumption and toward the development of mitigation efforts that make real long-standing changes. As is outlined, the first step toward sustainable consumption is acknowledging this colonial story and how colonial histories of extraction have been spatially and racially distributed. The COVID-19 pandemic has also made it evident the need to decolonize mainstream knowledge production when it comes to sustainable consumption with the Global South as a place that can inform more radical and emancipatory possibilities concerning sustainable consumption. The applicability of a de-colonial imagining will rest on post-colonial theory, as a body of knowledge being more broadly utilized and drawn upon by sustainability researchers. To this end, there are some promising new calls for research that “decolonizes” mainstream knowledge production in the context of sustainability, with the first two author’s currently working on a manuscript on the SDGs and the Global South. With this

potential in mind, these observations aim to provoke additional questions and avenues for future research.

This perspective article illustrated the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications to reach a balance among the three pillars of sustainability in the context of the SDG 12. From the social perspective, a safer shopping mode has taken precedence over other shopping predictors, causing not only turbulence in the market but also in the other two pillars, the environmental and the economic. As managers struggle to recover from those disruptions, it is expected the improvements in logistical functions along the entire supply chain consider principles of corporate sustainability.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

KP and LV: conceptualization and writing—original draft. KP, LV, and NM: investigation and writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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