

## Article

# “A Constant Juggling Act”—The Daily Life Experiences and Well-Being of Doctoral Students

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**Abstract:** (1) Background: There are increasing numbers of doctoral students globally. Poor mental health and well-being among university students, including doctoral students, is a growing concern globally, not least in this post-pandemic era. Engaging in a range of activities every day and maintaining balance between necessary and desired activities is believed to improve health and increase well-being. However, little is currently known about the daily life, activity balance and well-being of doctoral students. This study explored and described the daily life experiences of doctoral students and how pursuing their degree impacted their activity balance and well-being. (2) Method: Purposive sampling methods were used in this qualitative interpretive descriptive study to recruit 10 doctoral students in an Irish university. The data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed. (3) Findings: Doctoral students have a range of roles, responsibilities and activities that they need to and want to engage in daily. For many, balancing their daily activities and roles alongside their doctoral degree is challenging. Undertaking a doctoral degree can have both a positive and negative impact on well-being. (4) Conclusions: Obtaining an insight into the perspectives and daily life experiences of doctoral students allows for a better understanding of the students' journey. Supporting the well-being of doctoral students is essential to enhance their doctoral education and assist them in successfully completing their degree.

**Keywords:** doctoral student; PhD student; daily life; time-use; well-being; mental health; post-pandemic



**Citation:** Prendergast, A.; Usher, R.; Hunt, E. “A Constant Juggling Act”—The Daily Life Experiences and Well-Being of Doctoral Students. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 916. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090916>

Academic Editors: Margaret McLafferty, Elaine Murray and Siobhan O'Neill

Received: 8 August 2023

Revised: 31 August 2023

Accepted: 5 September 2023

Published: 8 September 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Increasing numbers of students are undertaking doctoral study both in Ireland and internationally [1]. For a doctoral award, students are required to complete a series of challenging academic tasks which may include mandatory course work and modules, competency examinations and to produce an original research dissertation in their area of academic interest [2]. In Ireland, doctoral degrees can be undertaken for full-time hours, typically over three to four years, or part-time hours, typically over five to six years. Doctoral candidates in Ireland undertake a workload of 90 credits for each year of full-time research or a proportional equivalent for part-time students. There are a range of doctoral degrees, including PhD by Research, thematic PhDs, practitioner doctorates or PhD by prior published work. All doctoral students are supported by a supervisory team which typically consists of two supervisors.

High proportions of doctoral students internationally have reported clinically relevant symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as low well-being, attributed to their studies [3–6]). The doctoral journey has been described by some doctoral students as one of “personal reward with a backdrop of stress, uncertainty and struggles with depression and anxiety” [6]. Poor mental health and well-being can be linked with loneliness [7], negative departmental cultures and practices [8], poor supervision practices and infrequent meetings [5,9] as well as financial difficulties [10]. Doctoral student mental health and

well-being is an expanding topic of research and a growing but frequently overlooked concern [11].

Poor mental health and well-being can have devastating consequences for doctoral students, both personally in terms of loneliness [7], suicidal thoughts [12] and financial difficulties with poor quality of living [10], as well as academically, resulting in poor productivity and work quality [13]. Attrition has been highlighted as a key consequence of decreased mental health and well-being among doctoral students [5,13,14]. Depending on the country and academic discipline, attrition rates from doctoral degrees can range from 30% to 50% [14]. Poor well-being among students that results in attrition is also costly to higher-level institutions as doctoral students contribute to higher-level institutions financially through fee payment, publication of their research and pursuing an academic career in higher-level departments following graduation [2,15]. The loss to wider society in terms of enhanced skills within the labour market [16,17], as well as knowledge advancement [2] is also noteworthy.

Research relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on doctoral study is still limited. Within universities, there was an abrupt shift to remote learning. While some doctoral students experienced positive outcomes in terms of better time management and productivity, others experienced a poor work environment, limited access to resources and negative mental well-being [18]. Public health restrictions also caused isolation [19,20], low motivation [21], a blurring between work and personal time [20], and mental health difficulties [22–24] for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Well-being is an experience with multiple layers and aspects [25]. For the purposes of this study, the term well-being refers to mental well-being, namely, “feeling good and functioning well” [26]. This refers to a state that is more than just the absence of disease or illness and is therefore a positive concept, suggesting that a person can experience ill health but still have a sense of well-being [27]. Furthermore, we all have activities that we need, want and must do in everyday life [28]. Moreover, it has been argued that what we do each day matters and is important to health and well-being [29].

However, there is a significant gap in the literature related to the daily life experiences of doctoral students, the activities they engage in and how these activities impact well-being. With increasing numbers of doctoral students in the Irish context [1,30], an increased focus on how their roles, responsibilities and experiences differ to that of other student populations would be beneficial in order to understand their reality and assist them in successfully completing their degree [5]. As universities are a main setting in the lives of doctoral students, where some of their main daily activities, social networks and support services are located, obtaining an insight into the perspectives and experiences of students is essential to try and understand the reality of students in their educational environment [31]. Enhanced understanding will also contribute to addressing both the causes and consequences of poor well-being [32].

This research study set out to answer the following research question: What are the daily life experiences of doctoral students, and how do these impact activity balance and well-being?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This was a qualitative interpretive descriptive (ID) study. An ID study allows qualitative researchers to examine a particular phenomenon and gain a deeper understanding of the subjective reality of an individual or group [33–35]. An interpretive descriptive design then moves beyond the literal description of the data to create a narrative of the research topic and attempts to interpret the findings without moving too far from that description [36]. Therefore, this study aimed to provide rich descriptions of the perspectives of doctoral students, as well as seek to interpret the data collected to produce a comprehensive account of doctoral student experience, and the meaning and implications it has for higher-level education.

Purposive sampling methods were used to recruit participants. The potential participants of this study were [registered doctoral students of University College Cork (full-time, part-time and any year of registration), who also registered for the “*Everyday Matters: Healthy Habits for University Life*” digital badge [37]. Following the distribution of the information letter, via the university’s online learning platform, those students who volunteered to partake (n = 10) completed an online consent form and short demographic questionnaire online via Microsoft Forms. The participants were not known to the research team prior to volunteering; therefore, no conflicts of interest arose.

The data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in duration in April and May of 2022. The interview guide was open-ended and informed by the study aims and explored how the participants experienced daily life while being a doctoral student, how being a doctoral student can positively or negatively impact daily life and well-being. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams in accordance with the COVID-19 public health guidelines in effect at the time and were audio-recorded using an audio recording device and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis, as guided by Braun and Clarke’s six-step approach [38], was used to identify and analyse patterns and themes in the data. These steps included transcription and familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and refining the themes, defining and naming the themes and reporting the themes. Trustworthiness was ensured by following the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability [39].

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the university’s Social Research Ethics Committee in April 2022 (log number: 2022-064).

### 3. Results and Discussion

This study had 10 participants. Table 1 includes information about the participants of this study. The participants were at various stages of their degree. They were mostly female, aged between 25 and 34 and only a few had caregiving responsibilities. The majority were full-time students, received funding for their degree and were not undertaking paid employment.

**Table 1.** Participant Information.

Pseudonym	Age Range	Year	Registration	Work Base	Care Responsibilities	Paid Employment	Degree Funding
Anna	25–34	3	Full-time	At home	No	No	Yes
Colin	25–34	3	Full-time	Campus office	No	No	Yes
Ellie	25–34	3	Full-time	At home	No	Yes	Yes
Angela	55–64	1	Part-time	At home	Yes	Yes	No
Tim	45–54	1	Part-time	Library	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carol	25–34	3	Full-time	Laboratory and office	No	No	Yes
Nora	25–34	2	Full-time	Home and campus	No	No	Yes
Katie	25–34	1	Full-time	At home	No	No	Yes
Miranda	25–34	4	Full-time	Home and laboratory	No	No	Yes
Amy	35–44	5	Full-time	Laboratory	Yes	No	Yes

The participants described the demands and challenges of undertaking doctoral studies and how it impacted their daily activities. Three themes were identified which illuminate the daily life experiences, activity balance and well-being of doctoral students.

#### 3.1. Theme 1: More Than a PhD Student

The participants discussed their daily life experiences, including the many roles and responsibilities they undertake daily. Firstly, the participants discussed their role as a

doctoral student during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants described attending classes, reading articles, completing administration duties and writing their thesis, which was described as “tedious” (Miranda) and “one of the hardest parts” (Miranda) of the degree. They also discussed assuming related roles, such as teaching modules and tutorials or hosting webinars. Managing these responsibilities was challenging. That said, many of the participants commented on the benefit of flexibility and how each day was so different. This meant that they rarely had a set schedule and could assume a variety of roles: “So in any one day shall we say, there could be at least 3 or 4 hats you put on” (Colin). Nonetheless, many of the participants found managing these various responsibilities challenging. Consistent with previous findings [40], many of the participants were concerned about the delay of their research due to the pandemic, particularly those who needed to complete fieldwork or in-person data collection.

Despite valuing their role as a doctoral student greatly, many of the participants stated that they had a range of roles and responsibilities beyond that of being a doctoral student and that they are “more than a PhD student” (Nora). For many, family was their first priority, where their family’s needs and happiness would always come before their degree. “Even if I am up to my eyeballs with PhD, my family will always come first. . . I can turn off a computer, I can’t go back and make those memories again” (Tim). While initially social visits with family were restricted due to the public health guidelines at the time, the participants made efforts to dedicate time aside from their doctoral degree to spend with their family members, including their significant other, parents, parents-in-law or siblings. Three participants were also parents, which they found put restrictions on how and when they could complete work for their doctoral degree as their day was greatly dictated by their children and their needs. For students with caregiving responsibilities, the pandemic made it particularly difficult to work from home while fulfilling other roles and responsibilities [20]. Consistent with other doctoral students [41,42], the participants greatly appreciated and relied on the support of their family members and friends and credited them for the help and care they had shown during their doctoral journey.

Another common daily life experience included the participants taking opportunities to socialise with others, particularly their friends, as a distraction from their work and time away from their degree. While some prioritised time with their friends and would not restrict their social life in favour of the doctoral degree, other participants spoke about how their social life and meeting friends greatly reduced after beginning their doctoral degree: “I don’t remember the last time I met up with a friend on my own” (Amy). As well as being a friend, the participants spoke about meeting and connecting with other doctoral students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some commented that they missed regular in-person meetings with other students, as they felt “restricted, isolated” (Colin) and found it difficult to know how they were progressing as they had no one to discuss this with. Nonetheless, virtual or in-person meetings with other students helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness, allowing them to discuss their experience as well as seek support and advice. “Even if they are working on a different project. . . it can be like a really important time to help you discuss like some challenges that you’re facing” (Carol). Other doctoral students are an important aspect of the doctoral student’s social environment as this relationship can improve the motivation, confidence and skills of students by receiving support and guidance from others undergoing the same experience [42–44].

The participants discussed experiencing financial difficulties, as even with a stipend many of the participants were unable to cover basic living expenses or accumulate savings. This, as well as the high and increasing costs of living [45] means many of the participants were forced to continue paid employment as part of their daily life to fulfil their financial obligations. Doctoral degrees typically do not offer students large financial incentives [46,47], and subsequent financial difficulties can cause several negative consequences such as attrition, stress and a lack of focus and make it more challenging for students to finish their dissertation [43,45].

### 3.2. Theme 2: Doctoral Degrees Are All-Consuming

The participants discussed managing the balance between their desired and necessary activities. While the participants appreciated the flexibility and autonomy, and the subsequent self-management of doctoral study, similar to other doctoral students [48,49], many of the participants reported that engaging in their role as a doctoral student took up the majority of their time each day. Striving towards balance was described as a “constant juggling act” (Colin) and often considered a struggle: “I find it challenging to juggle work, this, relationship, family, social life, myself” (Ellie). While some set boundaries and priorities, many attributed their lack of balance to a perceived lack of time in their daily life. Undertaking a doctoral degree was described as “perpetually busy” (Miranda), where the participants felt the pressure on their time was “immense” (Tim). The participants stated that there were always doctoral-related responsibilities to attend to and it always felt like they were falling behind in their work: “I actually don’t have any balance in my life, there’s just not enough hours in the day” (Amy). One participant summarised the demands on her time as both a doctoral student and parent and found that all her roles, responsibilities and activities were blending into one: “I would definitely have an issue with this blending into one thing, everything just merges together. Like I’m in the living room, my kids are with me, my laptop is open, and there’s something cooking in the kitchen. Like that’s ridiculous” (Amy). It is apparent that time poverty, which has been described as the feeling of having too many things to do with too little time [50], may be impacting doctoral students. Time poverty has been shown to have a negative impact on well-being, mental health and productivity [51], where, in contrast, those who perceive themselves to have more time experience more positive well-being [52].

However, some of the participants attempted to take time away from their degree in a variety of ways. Some spoke about the importance of their morning routine as a time for reflection. The majority of the participants viewed engaging in exercise as essential to health for “fresh air and movement” (Colin), to combat the desk-based nature of many doctoral degrees as well as an avenue to spend time away from their degree. This included going to the gym, short walks and jogging, cycling, hiking, swimming, kayaking, yoga and pilates, rowing and attending fitness classes, like boxercise or football training as part of a club. Participating in hobbies was considered “me time” (Katie), where the participants could spend time “relaxing” (Carol). For some, this was through attending sporting events like hurling matches and going to events like concerts, once the pandemic restrictions had lifted. Others had specific hobbies and enjoyed engaging in, for example, gardening, embroidery, fashion, drawing and painting.

Despite wanting to take time away from their degree, the participants of this study and others [42,53] expressed feelings of guilt and shame when experiencing challenges with managing their roles and responsibilities: “Well as a PhD student, I always have this guilt when I am not in front of my laptop” (Amy). To manage this, the participants spoke about making trade-offs within their schedules and routines. A major trade-off for the participants was their sleep. Poor quantity and quality sleep was a common complaint from the participants in this study and others [5,54]. Insufficient sleep among doctoral students is strongly related to stress, poorer daytime functioning and poor mental well-being [54,55]. Another key trade-off the participants made was disengaging from desired activities, in favour of their doctoral work. Although the participants wanted to put themselves first and take more time for themselves, the doctoral work and responsibilities took over: “everything gets pushed whether you like it or not” (Nora). Withdrawal, disruption or changes in a person’s ability to engage in chosen meaningful activities can have a major impact on an individual’s health and well-being [56].

### 3.3. Theme 3: Doctoral Degrees Can Have a Positive and Negative Impact on Well-Being

The participants discussed the many ways their doctoral degree had a positive impact on their well-being. The participants of this study, as well as other students [49], expressed that they are satisfied with their decision to pursue a doctoral degree due to working in



stimulating environments where research was something they “get a genuine buzz from” (Colin) and they considered their new learning “empowering” (Angela). The participants commented that the skills and experiences gained from the doctoral degree and subsequent opportunities will always be beneficial: “I think all of the skills and experiences that you have in your PhD you will carry forward” (Carol). Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, undertaking a doctoral degree provided participants with purpose during these difficult times, as their work was something to focus on each day, and they had a goal to work towards. As well as this, the participants wanted to “add to the literature” (Ellie) and contribute to society by conducting research. While the doctoral journey was far from easy, the participants discussed how experiencing difficulties helped them in developing and improving their resilience in their academic work, as they learned to cope with adversity, setbacks and challenges. The participants also appreciated the connections they had developed with their supervisors and other doctoral students and felt there was a supportive postgraduate community within the university, where “other PhD students are very supportive” (Tim). Supervisors are key individuals in a doctoral student’s community [9,43] and can help to reduce burnout and exhaustion among students as well as helping students adjust to daily life as a doctoral student [57]. Nevertheless, some doctoral students cite issues with their supervisory teams [9,43,54], as well as departmental cultures and practices [8,58], potentially creating a negative doctoral experience for students.

The participants also discussed other negative aspects of doctoral study. Namely, how their well-being had been negatively impacted by undertaking their doctoral degree. Academia can often encourage overworking, where students can see mental health difficulties as a normal experience and a marker that they are working hard [4,6]. Imposter syndrome is frequently reported by doctoral students [53,53] and was described by the participants of this study too. When experiencing imposter syndrome, the participants experienced “self-doubt” (Ellie) and felt like they were not “good enough” (Anna) to be undertaking a doctoral degree, thinking that they were not as capable, intelligent or accomplished as their doctoral peers. Imposter syndrome can be a predictor of stress as well as mental health and well-being difficulties in doctoral students [3,44]. Almost half of the participants of the study spoke about experiencing anxiety, which has also been found commonly amongst doctoral students [4–6,54]. When feeling anxious, the participants felt that they would “self-sabotage” (Ellie) and constantly worry and feel overwhelmed about their workload. This caused one participant to consider leaving her doctoral degree: “There are some days where I am literally like “yeah no, I am dropping out, like I just get so frustrated and fed up, it’s just constant” (Nora).

Consistent with previous research [41,43], one of the most reported negative impacts on well-being for participants was stress. Stress was a constant and considered a “baseline” (Miranda) and was caused directly by the doctoral degree, particularly around deadlines or challenging tasks. Some doctoral students experienced stress due to concerns regarding the next steps in their lives and their career prospects [45,53]. Doctoral graduates are available globally, and in increasing numbers, while the number of academic job positions has not grown in parallel [6,17]. As a result, doctoral students may have poorer career prospects due to the competition between doctoral students for both industry and academic jobs upon graduation [17].

The doctoral degree did not only have an impact on the mental health of the participants but also on their physical health. One participant spoke about physical health difficulties and the subsequent fatigue. Two other participants commented that they had gained weight during the doctoral journey due to not eating well, arising from the stress of the degree. Poor quantity and quality sleep was also a common complaint from the participants. “I would say my body needs about 7 h a day, but I feel like I probably get maybe 5 to 7, depending on the day really” (Miranda). Studies have reported that health issues, physical or otherwise, can contribute to a decrease in well-being and cause difficulty in pursuing a doctoral degree [54,59].

The participants used various methods to support their well-being, including meditation, going outdoors for movement and fresh air, listening to well-being podcasts and practicing gratitude. Many sought structured well-being supports, such as workshops and courses, whether they be extra-curricular or credit-bearing modules; well-being webinars; university counselling services; or coaching sessions. This helped to “talk to someone outside of your friends and family about the things that you’re finding hard” (Carol).

#### 4. Implications

As demonstrated by this study, doctoral students have a range of roles, responsibilities and activities associated specifically with their degree as well as outside of their degree. Within this study and the literature, there is a narrative that pursuing a doctoral degree is a long and demanding academic journey [2], where there is an expectation of sustained mental effort, long working hours [45] and a willingness to experience stress and mental health difficulties in order to achieve the higher goal of the doctorate [4,6,60]. The negative impact of a doctoral degree on mental well-being reported in this study is a cause for concern and requires further exploration. The pressure and perceived culture of doctoral research could potentially further escalate the well-being issues of doctoral students, because the normalising of high stress could lead to the under-reporting of issues and students being less likely to seek help. To address the mental health and well-being needs of a range of students, it is essential that higher-level institutions adopt a whole-university approach [51,61] and, in doing this, provide a range of evidence-based interventions across a continuum of support including universal, targeted and intensive levels [62,63], so that all students are fully supported to succeed in their degree [64]. This may involve offering credit-bearing and co-curricular well-being modules for doctoral students, as most are offered to undergraduate cohorts [65]. Peer mentoring programmes or buddy system initiatives show promise as well-being supports [66,67]. Importantly, timely access to appropriate medical and psychological treatment is needed when indicated [67,68]. Some students see a role for university staff, including doctoral supervisors, in facilitating mental health and well-being support [69–71]. There is potential for doctoral supervisors to be trained to recognise students who are experiencing difficulties and where to refer them for support [15,72,73].

Accordingly, this study found that doctoral students may encounter a variety of experiences and difficulties that undergraduate students do not, such as the financial costs associated with doctoral education. Improved funding or increases in grants and stipends have the potential to improve the consequences associated with financial difficulties and have been linked with higher satisfaction within the doctoral journey, alongside lower levels of attrition [74]. The Irish government completed a review of PhD stipends this year, recommending that the average stipend be increased from EUR 18,500 to EUR 25,000 annually [75].

Further upstream, it has been argued that supporting student well-being requires universities to reflect on their policies and how they can better promote the mental health and well-being of all students [15]. While university strategic plans, policies and mission statements typically make references to the mental health and well-being of students in general, specific references to graduate students, including doctoral students, are often absent [76]. Universities need to consider how their policies impact the health and well-being of their entire student population and how health and well-being can be prioritised alongside academic learning.

#### 5. Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

The sample size may be considered a limitation. It was an aim to recruit more than 10 participants; however, due to time constraints as well as a small pool of potential participants, more participants were unable to be recruited. The majority of the sample identified as female, meaning male voices were not as well represented in this study and may potentially lead to gender bias. Only two participants were in the later years of their

study, which may have had an impact on findings. The sample in this study originated from one single university in one single location, and therefore, it is unclear how the results would translate to other countries and universities with varying policies and expectations. Further, the participants had all enrolled in the EMDB so may have been more aware of caring for their own mental health and well-being. It is unclear if students who had not prioritised doing the EMDB have different challenges or opinions. The inclusion of both part-time and full-time students made it difficult to generate specific results that would apply to a single population of either part-time or full-time doctoral students.

Future research directions could include longitudinal research to allow a deeper insight into the daily lives and well-being of doctoral students across time rather than a singular point in time. Examining the experiences of part-time and full-time doctoral students separately can measure the similarities and differences between these populations. A focus on doctoral students with caregiving responsibilities, as well as studies to understand doctoral students' experiences of transitions into and out of doctoral study, has the potential to deepen understanding of the daily life experiences of doctoral students at various degree stages and with differing responsibilities.

## 6. Conclusions

This research study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the daily life experiences of doctoral students, and how do these impact activity balance and well-being? Through the three themes presented above, it is evident that the daily life experiences of doctoral students are complex and multifaceted and truly is a "constant juggling act". It is apparent that the daily life experiences of doctoral students are varied according to their own personal and environmental factors. Doctoral students engage in a wide range of personal and academic activities and associated responsibilities each day. While some were satisfied with how they spend their time each day, all the participants found it was a challenge to balance what they needed and wanted to do. Furthermore, undertaking a doctoral degree had both a positive and negative impact on their well-being. These findings should be viewed as important. To reduce high attrition rates and support the mental health and well-being of doctoral students, it is essential that there are adequate programmes, services and supports to assist doctoral students in managing their mental health and well-being, so that they are fully supported to continue in their degree [66,70]. It is also important that both national and international policy makers review their current policies and how they reflect the current needs of all university students, inclusive of doctoral students. Higher-level institutions should also ensure that their campuses are health-promoting, where negative academic cultures should be examined and managed, and collaboration and supportive academic community is fostered. With increasing attention on how to reduce attrition rates and provide adequate well-being supports for doctoral students, new insights such as those offered in this study are needed.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.P., R.U. and E.H.; methodology, A.P. and R.U.; formal analysis, A.P. and E.H.; investigation, A.P., R.U. and E.H.; resources, A.P., R.U. and E.H.; data curation, A.P. and E.H.; writing—original draft preparation, A.P.; writing—review and editing, A.P. and E.H.; visualization, A.P., R.U. and E.H.; supervision, R.U. and E.H.; project administration, A.P., R.U. and E.H.; funding acquisition, E.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This manuscript forms part of the Masters by Research degree undertaken by the first author. Bank of Ireland funded fees for this degree.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) of University College Cork (UCC) in April 2022 (log number: 2022-064). Any identifying text has been removed from the manuscript and pseudonyms are used throughout.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, in both a written and verbal format.



**Data Availability Statement:** The full thesis that reports this research can soon be accessed at <https://cora.ucc.ie/collections/406f6d09-4e5c-47ed-bb27-5a6e19c01c20> (accessed on 7 August 2023).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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