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Research Article

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## Phenomenological Analysis of Student Views on Human Geography Lesson

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### Abstract

It is important to evaluate the education given in the institutions where geography education is given at the higher education level and to get student opinions. In this age where information technology is developing and entering the education life day by day, it has been considered important to examine human geography education with new technologies and methods. The aim of this study is to analyze the views of geography students about the human geography course with the phenomenology design, which is one of the qualitative research methods. In this context, a semi-structured interview form consisting of three questions was prepared with expert opinion to be asked to the students. Due to Covid-19 outbreak restrictions, a university's geography department, which is at the west of Turkey, have asked questions to the students electronically and received their answers the same way. The answers to the questions in the interview form answered by the students were interpreted by coding and categorizing. According to the result of the research, it was concluded that the students' opinions about the human geography course were positive, that the students gave more priority to the population issue and it attracts their attention. According to this result, it is thought that the transformation of human geography lessons into an education strengthened with technological infrastructure is needed for students to be more beneficial in their future professional and academic lives, so changes should be made in this direction.

### Key Words

Geography education • Human geography lesson • Student views • Phenomenology

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Geography science, which deals with the relationship and interaction between man and nature, has been subdivided in different ways by different scientists. Unlike the geography, which Özey (2002) describes as a science that examines the distribution of natural, human and economic events in the whole or part of the earth and their relationship with each other in the axis of cause and effect; Doğanay et al., (2012) divide geography into four parts: physical, human-economic, regional and geography education. On the other hand, Baydil (2003) divided the geography into two parts because he examine the subjects with general and local geography methods, while Gümüş and İlhan (2013) stated that the science of geography is divided into physical and human geography branches in universities, sub-branches such as regional geography, Turkey geography, geographical information systems were added to these departments at the same time.

Human geography, which is one of the important sub-branches of geography; deals with the interaction of natural environment and human (Doğanay, 2017). For this reason, together with population and settlement issues, issues related to human and place are also examined within the human geography (Kayan, 2000; Uzun, 2018). Kayan (2000) states that while the activities of societies on the earth constitute the basic subject of human geography, the place of cultural geography in human geography gains importance.

The teaching of human geography in higher education institutions, which is one of the important sub-branches of geography science, is differentiating day by day. In today's world, where new methods and approaches in the field of education have become widespread and used with the effect of rapidly developing information and communication technologies, human geography teaching is also developing. While developing information technologies are increasing the educational materials and information resources, it also makes it difficult for people to access reliable information sources. At this point, the importance of formal education in educational institutions under the guidance of educators becomes clear once again.

As in every field of education, one of the important issues in geography teaching is the thoughts of learners and educators about the lesson (Akınoğlu, 2005). Examining, supervising and developing the education and training activities provided in educational institutions can be evaluated in the best way by examining this education according to the opinions of the students. For this purpose, it is very important to evaluate the courses given in higher education institutions according to students' opinions. It is stated by researchers that the attitudes of teachers who raise younger generations towards a course are an effective factor in students' attitudes towards that course (Peker & Mirasyedioğlu, 2003). In this respect, researches have shown that undergraduate students' attitudes and behaviors about a course also affect their students when they also become teacher.

Human geography is one of the basic courses taught in both geography departments and teaching areas such as social studies and classroom teaching (Gökçe, 2009). With this context, the views of undergraduate students about human geography lesson gain importance.

When the research studies in the national literature that deal with student views on the human geography course are examined, it was seen that these studies were mostly aimed at examining the attitudes of the participants towards this course with quantitative data. For example; a scale study by Kılcanmet et al. (2019) which is measuring attitudes towards human geography lesson; the research of Ablak et al., (2020) which is examining the attitudes of social

studies teacher candidates towards human geography course with different variables; İnce (2021)'s study, which examines the attitudes of geography students towards the human geography lesson, is among these. Apart from these studies, there are quite a number of studies examining the attitudes of the participants towards the geography lesson in general. Sevilmiş-Karaşahin (2006), Alım (2008), Özgen et al., (2009), Ulusoy and Gülüm (2009), Aydın et al., (2010), Uzunöz (2011), Aydın (2012), Şahin et al., (2015), Dikmenli and Çifçi (2016), Uzun (2018), Sözen (2019) and Şanlı (2019) 's studies are also some of the examples. When human geography researches are reviewed in the international literature, it is seen that different studies have been conducted. Among of them, the studies conducted by Lu et al., (2003), Graham et al., (2017), Ye et al., (2020) stands out. In general, the common feature which is seen in all these studies is that, attitudes about quantitative data and human geography are being examined. However, there is no study that have examined the thoughts of geography major's students about the human geography lesson using qualitative research method. With this feature, our work is the first in this regard.

### **Purpose and Importance of the Research**

In this study, which was conducted in order to see how geography department students' thoughts about human geography lesson were shaped, the question "what are the opinions of geography students about human geography lessons?" constitutes the main problem. In line with this basic problem, an interview form consisting of three questions was prepared and answers were sought for the following sub-problems.

1-What are the general views and opinions of the students about the human geography course?

2-According to the students' opinions, what should be the priority order of the subjects taught in the human geography course?

3-For students, what are the most attractive subjects and their reasons in the human geography lesson?

The research was carried out with students who studied geography and took human geography courses. The evaluation of the courses given in the education system, the examination of students' views about those courses is a need for improving education. This study is important in terms of evaluating the human geography course taught in the direction of students' opinions. The research has been limited with the geography department of a university in western Turkey in the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. It was assumed that the research question and its sub-problems measure the subject in detail and students' views reflect the current situation as it is.

### **Method**

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### **Research Design**

In this study, where the opinions of geography students about the human geography course were examined, the phenomenological pattern from the qualitative research methods was used. The phenomenological pattern focuses on phenomena that we are aware of but do not have an in-depth and detailed content (Creswell, 2020; Yıldırım &

Şimşek, 2013). In addition, phenomenological research is defined as a method that reveals the differences between phenomena, examines the existence of events, creates conceptual categories and relates these categories with each other (Çepni, 2018). In this direction, the opinions of the geography department students about the human geography lesson were tried to be analyzed in depth.

### **Study Group**

In accordance with the purpose of the research and the structure of the qualitative research, convenience sampling was preferred as one of the purposeful sampling methods in order to bring speed and practicality to the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In accordance with the phenomenology pattern, the opinions of those who have experience on the subject are important (Creswell, 2020) and for this reason, attention has been paid to the fact that the students taking human geography course are in the research group. The research was carried out with students taking the human geography course in the geography department of a university in the west of Turkey in the spring semester of the 2020-21 academic year. A total of 46 students, 24 of whom were female and 22 of whom were male, voluntarily participated in the research among 62 students who took this course. The vast majority of these students are 1st and 2nd grade students (1st grade = 14, 2nd grade = 14, 3rd grade = 10 and 4th grade = 8 students). Participants' names were kept confidential and their views were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4.

### **Data collection tool**

The data used in the research were obtained by document analysis method. Document analysis is defined as the method performed by the analysis of written materials containing information about the phenomenon or facts to be investigated (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). in line with their own knowledge and tendencies by writing it to the paper (Creswell, 2020; Patton, 2014). For this purpose, an interview form was prepared to examine the opinions of geography students about the human geography lesson. While demographic information is included in the first part of the form consisting of two parts, there are three open-ended questions in the second part. The questions in the form were selected from the item pool created by literature review. Necessary arrangements were made in terms of suitability and adequacy after the expert's opinion on the selected questions was obtained. The interviews that could not be made face to face due to the restrictions of the Covid-19 outbreak, questions were asked to the students as written form in electronic environment and the answers were obtained this way. Participants wrote their thoughts on the questions in the form on a voluntary basis and with their free will. After all questions were answered, the forms (46) recorded in the system by the participants were transferred to the computer environment by the researcher and analyzed.

### **Validity and Reliability in the Study**

All validity and reliability measures were taken by the researcher in this study. Expert opinion was consulted in the preparation of the questionnaire for the internal validity of the research. Flexibility was provided in terms of time by giving a one-week period for the participants to fill in the questions correctly and consciously. For the external validity of the research; the research method, characteristics of the participant group, data collection tools, collection and detailed analysis of the data can be shown as an example. Form which was created in electronic environment to

increase internal reliability and prevent data loss in research, it was ensured that all data directly reached the researcher as the participant wrote. While analyzing the data, we got help from a field expert in the formation of codes, themes and categories. In order to increase external reliability, the obtained data can be compared with the studies of other researchers and discussed in the conclusion section.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis in phenomenology research is aimed at revealing experiences and meanings. In this study, the data obtained in answering the sub-problems were analyzed by content analysis method. In this respect, the process made at content analysis is to gather, organize and interpret similar data within the framework of categories and themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 259). Tavşancıl and Aslan (2001) defined content analysis as classifying and inferring the message contained in written or verbal materials as meaningful, objective and systematic.

The answers given by the students of the Geography department to the form in the electronic environment were subjected to content analysis and presented in the form of codes, categories and themes in the findings section. With this research, it has been tried to examine how geography students' thoughts about the human geography lesson developed, what it was affected by and in what direction it needed to develop.

### Results

In this section, in order to examine the opinions of geography students about the human geography lesson, the findings of the solutions of the questions asked to the students are included.

#### Findings regarding the general thoughts of the geography department students about the human geography course

In the first sub-problem of the study, what the geography department students generally thought about the human geography lesson were asked; the codes and categories created as a result of the analysis of the answers received are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *General Views of the Geography Department Students about the Human Geography (HG) Lesson*

Row	Category	Codes about student thoughts	f	Participants
1	As content (HG)	Describes the struggle between human and Physical and human geography is like a mosaic that complements each other.	3	P8, P10, P25,
			2	P1, P6,
		It is a lesson that teaches life and increases	2	P14, P28
		It is a course that increases curiosity to	2	P28, P31
		It examines human life comprehensively.	2	P11, P33,
		There are subjects such as economy, population distribution, human development index, per	1	P42,
2	As a branch of geography (HG)	It is an important field lesson in geography.	3	P21, P27, P30
		It is the course in which human factors are	3	P7, P18, P42,
		It is one of the branches of geography.	2	P2, P6,
		It is one of the department courses.	2	P3, P19,
3	In terms of	It is an enjoyable and entertaining lesson.	4	P15, P25, P36, P37,
		It is an important and interesting lesson.	3	P4, P34, P40

	student interest (HG)	The struggle for life described in lesson Harmony with nature is important.	2	P29, P43,
			1	P21
4	In terms of	I don't like some topics.	1	P44
	negative thought	I do not care much for this lesson.	1	P46

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that the opinions of the geography department students about the human geography (HG) course are grouped under four categories as “in terms of content (HG), as a branch of geography (HG), in terms of student interest (HG) and in terms of negative thinking (HG)”.

When the data are examined, it is noteworthy that the most coded category is "human geography as content", while the least coded category is "human geography in terms of negative thinking". According to these data, it is found that the thoughts of the students of the geography department are generally positive.

Some of the students who gave positive opinions were as follows:

P6: “Geography is divided into two as physical and human. Human geography is one of the two branches of geography. Physical and human geography are like a mosaic that complements each other, because geography without humans is unthinkable.”

P14: “Geography is a lesson that teaches life. We also learn, study and live life in the lesson.”

P19: “I think we have a good department lesson that draws our attention to the subject while listening and learning about human geography.”

P21: “Geography is a branch of science that examines the interaction of nature and human. For this reason, it is important to understand how people are in harmony with nature. I think the human geography lesson has an important place in geography in the context of explaining, interpreting and predicting past and future people and their activities.”

P25: “In my opinion, human geography is a very important lesson in terms of examining the changes made by humans on the earth and nature.”

P41: “It is a fun lesson that I love and care about.”

P42: “It is an important and serious course that includes up-to-date and reliable data on human factors such as settlement, population distribution and economy, and their spatial distribution with maps.”

The number of students who expressed negative opinions was determined as only two. The opinions of these students, albeit in a small number, are as follows:

P46: “I am still thinking about what it will do if we know the world population. For this reason, I do not care much about this lesson.”

Considering both positive and negative opinions, it is seen that the majority of the students show positive thoughts on the human geography lesson.

### Priority Order of the Subjects Learned in the Human Geography Lesson

In line with the second sub-problem of the study, "According to your thought, how should the priority order of the subjects taught in human geography lesson be?" question were asked to the geography department students. Thus, the opinions of the students about the priority of the subjects of the human geography lesson are presented in Table 2 with the codes and categories created according to the answers received.

Table 2

#### *Priority Order of Subjects Taught in Human Geography Lesson*

Row	Category	Codes about student thoughts	f	Participants
1	Population	Population and population census	14	P2, P4, P5, P8, P10, P11, P20, P25, P28, P30, P35, P36, P38
		The subject and importance of population	9	P1, P3, P5, P6, P8, P9,
		Population policies	4	P14, P28, P32, P41
		Population pyramids	3	P5, P16, P33
		Population theories	3	P1, P9, P19
		Problems brought about by world population	3	P3, P27, P37
		Factors affecting population growth rate	2	P10, P23,
2	Settlement	Migration, its implications and factors	2	P40
		Settlement geography	5	P6, P14, P23, P38, P45
		Crowded cities	4	P7, P15, P24, P46
		City functions	3	P12, P22, P23
		Cities and their features	3	P8, P30, P43
		Rural settlements	2	P10, P35,
3	Economy	The impact of migration on settlements	1	P40
		Economy	6	P4, P12, P25, P30, P44, P46
		Economic activities	4	P2, P18, P20, P22
		Sustainability and economy	3	P17, P29, P45
4	Environment	Agricultural geography	2	P17, P13, P35
		Human-environment interaction	3	P4, P16, P19
		Humankind's influence on nature	2	P10, P28
		The pressure of migration on the environment	1	P40
5	Other topics in human geography	Scientific fields of human geography	2	P27, P44
		Relationship of human geography with other	2	P6, P10,
		Cultural geography	2	P12, P27
		Historical geography	2	P8, P27
		Political geography	2	P1, P36
Health geography	1	P43		

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that the opinions of the geography department students about the priority order of the subjects taught in the human geography course are grouped under five categories under the name of "population, settlement, economy, environment and other subjects in human geography". Among these categories, "population" category have got the highest frequency ( $f=40$ ). Under this category, codes such as population and census, subject and importance of population geography, population policies, population pyramids, population theories, problems brought about by world population growth, factors affecting population growth rate, migration and its factors have been identified. Students also generated ideas in the categories of settlement outside the population (18), economy (15), environment (6) and other issues in human geography (11). In this case, it is seen that students give priority in human geography to population, settlement and economy issues. Students' opinions on this subject are short and clear answers. Some students' views are as follows:

P1: “Within the human geography, the subject and importance of population geography attracts my attention the most..”

P8: “The problems brought by the world population growth and the threats people will face in the future are the top priority..”

P40: “It is the effect of migration on settlements.”

P17: “Agricultural geography is also a priority, as is sustainability and economy.”

P19: “For me, human-environment interaction is the first subject that comes to mind.”

P27: “Human Geography has different sub-areas such as cultural geography, historical geography, and political geography. Since I think these sub-areas are neglected, they should be the priority issues.”

P6: “The relationship of human geography with other sciences can be explained in detail at the beginning.”

### The most Interesting Subject Contents and Reasons for Geography Students in Human Geography Lesson

In line with the third sub-purpose of the study, "What are the topics, contents and reasons that takes your attention the most in the human geography lesson?" question were asked to the geography department students. Thus, the opinions of the students about the most attractive subject, its contents and reasons, in the human geography lesson are given in Table 3 with the code and categories created according to the answers received.

Table 3

*The Subject Contents and Reasons Which Takes Most Attraction of Students in Human Geography lesson*

Row	Category	Codes about student thoughts	f	Causes	Participants
1	Population	Population and population geography	6	Interest, curiosity, dynamic structure	P4, P6, P15, P19, P35, P43 P2, P3, ,P10, P17, P28, P29, P17, P26, P28, P31 P4, P12, P33, P46 P3, P4, P20, P36, P2, P26, P33
		Population characteristics	6		
		Population policies	4		
		Population pyramids	4		
		Population census	4		
		Migrations	3		
2	Economy and development	Developed and undeveloped countries	3	Development indicators, comparison, interest	P20, P26, P45 P5, P13, P12, P34 P10, P38
		Development index	2		
		Economic geography	2		
		Energy resources and politics	2		
3	Environment	Preserving the natural environment	2	Interest, care, take attention	P16, P24, P9, P40, P19 P28
		Human-environment interaction	2		
		Lifestyles and policies	1		
		Natural disasters	1		
4	Culture	Cultural geography	2	Curiosity, interest, differences	P25, P44, P20, P22 P17, P45
		Language and geography distribution	2		
		Cultures and religions	2		
5	Other topics in human geography	Historical geography	2	Interest in history, growing information age.	P16, P19 P28 P11
		Education and geography	1		
		Political geography	1		

The opinions of the geography department students about the subject contents and reasons that attracted their most attention in the human geography lesson were gathered under five categories as seen in Table 3. When these

categories are listed in terms of the code frequencies they contain, they are "population (27), economy and development (9), environment (6), culture (6), other subjects in human geography (4)". It is noteworthy that students' views focus especially on "population and population geography, population characteristics, population policies, population pyramids, population censuses and migrations" in the "population" category and generate ideas on these issues. Considering the reasons why the population issue is the most expressed subject, it is stated that the population has a dynamic structure, the population policies of the countries are effective together with the interest and curiosity in population. In the economy category, "developed and underdeveloped countries, development index, economic geography, energy resources and politics" issues stand out, while in the environment category, "environmental protection and natural disasters" issues stand out, in the culture category "cultures, languages and religions" stand out and finally in the human geography, "historical geography, cultural geography and political geography" subjects came to the fore in the category of other subjects. When we look at the reasons why students express these issues a lot, it is expressed that the subjects are dynamic together with the interest and curiosity in these subjects, they give the opportunity to compare the indicators such as development of the countries and they are the subjects that attract attention in the developing information age. The opinions of the students on this subject are in the form of short and clear answers. According to the categories, some students' views are as follows:

P3: "Since I have a interest into distribution of the population and the natural and human factors affecting the distribution in continent, country, region, department and region, I would like to work on these issues."

P28: "I find it important to investigate on population of the country, the increase and decrease of the population due to its dynamic structure, its expression with graphics, comparing different countries, and the differences in population policies of the countries are interesting to me."

P38: "I would like to evaluate the living conditions in undeveloped and developed countries and learn and make research economic knowledge on subjects such as agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, transportation, trade, energy, tourism and mining, which are effective in the economies of these countries. It is interesting for me to read and compare publications on this field..

P19: "Human relations with the environment in which they live, the effect of the environment on human and human on the environment, sustainable lifestyle and policies aiming to protect the natural environment; these are the most interesting issues as they are important for planning the future life."

P45: "I would like to work on cultural geography, because the lifestyles, languages, religions and social relations of people belonging to a culture always make me curious."

P16: "As a field of study, I am interested in examining, getting to know and promoting the most interesting places and settlements that people have built on earth with the historical geography.

### **Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions**

In this study, which examined the opinions of the students of the geography department about the human geography course, it was concluded that the majority of the students had positive opinions about this course. According to the research data, students' opinions are grouped under four categories. While it is seen that positive

opinions are grouped in three categories, negative opinions are detected in a category with only two opinions. In light of these data, it can be said that the opinions of the geography department students about the human geography course are generally positive and they make correct determinations about the purpose, content, scope and objectives of this course. These results coincide with the work of Ablak et al. (2020) and İnce (2021). In both studies, it was found that students' attitudes towards human geography lesson were positive. In studies conducted with secondary and undergraduate students in terms of general geography (Akınoğlu, 2005; Dikmenli & Çifçi, 2016; Sözen, 2019; Ulusoy & Gülüm, 2009), positive results were obtained for the geography lesson. According to all these results, it can be said that the human geography course is accepted positively by geography students and meets their professional, academic and social needs.

The second important sub-aim of the study is the opinions of the geography department students about the priority order of the subjects taught in the human geography course. It has been observed that student views on this issue are grouped under five categories and the highest priority is given to the population category. According to this result, it was determined that the geography department students give priority especially the subjects of population, population characteristics and migration, which are among the subjects taught in the human geography course. As seen in other categories other than population, it has been concluded that settlement, economy, environment and other issues of human geography are not being ignored either. These results coincide with the study of Uzun (2018). In the frequency analysis used by Uzun (2018) in the keywords used in the postgraduate theses in the field of human geography, he reached the concepts such as "tourism, population, economy, urban". On the other hand, newly developing topics of the human geography field such as "globalization and development, crime geography, sports geography, electoral geography, behavioral geography" reached in the same research differ with our research. Likewise, Karakuş and Karaman (2019), in their study, which they examined the opinions of social studies teachers about the subjects they had difficulty in teaching, reached the conclusion that there are also the subjects of population characteristics, distribution of population, settlement, migration and economic activities in addition to physical geography, which does not coincide with our research.

It is seen that in the researches on general geography, concepts related to human geography are reached. (Dikmenli & Çifçi, 2016), when they analyzed the first words that came to mind of students regarding the geography lesson, they reached a high rate of concepts such as "population, economic activities, countries and migration" together with physical geography. These findings are important in revealing student perceptions about geography lesson. In the study of Şanlı (2019), it was found that the human economic geography course is one of the courses in which spatial thinking skills should be taught. Based on the results in this part of the study and the results in the literature, it can be said that the geography department students' opinions about the priority order of the subjects taught in the human geography course are consistent and compatible with the literature.

The third sub-aim of the study is the opinions of the geography department students about the subject, contents and reasons that attract their most attention in the human geography lesson. It has been observed that student thoughts on this issue are grouped under five categories. It has been determined that the most interesting subject contents of the students are population, economy, environment, culture and other subjects in human geography.

When the reasons of why these issues were expressed more by the students were examined, it was concluded that the interest and curiosity into these subjects, the subjects having a dynamic structure, allowing country comparisons to be made, and meeting the requirements of the information age. These results coincide with the results of [Dikenli and Çifçi \(2016\)](#). [Dikenli and Çifçi \(2016\)](#) concluded in their research that students like subjects related to human and economic geography because of the fact that population, environment and society issues were the most favorite subjects of students in geography lesson. What caused occurrence of this situation is that, these sources are easy to understand and interpret. In addition, the fact that the population issue has a very low frequency among the subjects that students dislike most in the same study confirms this situation. In the study of [Aydm \(2012\)](#), where he investigated the thoughts of social sciences high school students towards the geography lesson, it was concluded that students had no difficulty in understanding human geography but they had difficulties in understanding physical geography. Why? because there's abundance of abstract concepts. Similarly, [Bozkurt \(2003\)](#) found that geography teachers had difficulty in explaining physical geography to their students due to the education they received at the university, but they did not have difficulty in explaining human geography. According to these results, geography department students, in line with their interests and curiosities in the human geography course; it was concluded that population, economy and culture topics attracted their attention in line with its dynamic structure, comparative feature, easy understanding and beneficial for 21st century needs.

Based on all these results, it has been concluded that the human geography course is important for the education of the geography department students; they especially give priority to population topic and they focus on population, economy and environment issues. It is thought that this field course taken at the university will have positive results for geographers in both professional, academic and social life after university education. The following recommendations have been made in line with the findings and results of the study:

In line with the results of the research, variations can be made in the sub-branches of this course in order to give more detailed education especially in the geography departments, and misconceptions and prejudices such as teaching only certain sub-branches can be avoided.

Apart from population, settlement and economic issues, the developing subjects of human geography such as “electoral geography, behavioral geography, crime geography, health geography and sports geography can also be emphasized.

By using student-centered teaching methods and techniques, in which the student is actively involved in the learning process in the human geography course, his / her interest in the lesson can be increased even more.

Department teachers can also teach to undergraduate students teaching methods and techniques, so that undergraduate students can teach their students the knowledge they have learned in human geography in a more accurate and permanent way when they become teachers in the future.

### **Ethic**

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and ethical standards.

### **Author Contributions**

This article was written with the joint contributions of two authors.

### **Conflict of Interest**

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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