

How do students adapt to Islamic boarding school? An exploration of factors that affect school well-being

Muhammad Syukri Pulungan^{1*}, Fauzi Rizal², Ulfah Fajarini³

^{1,2} Faculty of Da'wah, UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan, Indonesia

³ Faculty of Education, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding Author*: syukri@uinsyahada.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received 07-01-2025

Revised 15-10-2025

Accepted 20-11-2025

Keywords:

Adaptation
Boarding School
School Well-Being
Religiosity
Boarding Students

ABSTRACT

The compulsory boarding program at State Islamic University (UIN) of Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan is designed to foster academic discipline, religious character, and social responsibility. The transition to a communal environment with strict rules, the rhythm of congregational worship, and structured learning targets requires each student to adapt in ways that are not uniform. This research aimed to understand in depth how first-year students interpret the process of adjustment to dormitory life and how this process is related to their school well-being. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven students and one dormitory supervisor, supported by observational data on daily dormitory routines. Thematic analysis yielded five interdependent dimensions: *Having* (material sufficiency and perceived institutional care), *Loving* (relational support and sense of belonging), *Being* (structured growth and self-regulation), *Health* (physical-mental balance), and *Religiosity* (faith-based meaning-making). Participants often reframe environmental tensions such as insufficient water, overcrowding, or burnout through spiritual resilience, making *religiosity* an important interpretive filter that links resource constraints to emotional stability and moral development. This integration extends Konu & Rimpelä's (2002) conventional model of SWB by placing religiosity as a core mediator in the setting of religion-based education. These findings informed a dormitory management strategy to integrate basic services, inclusive peer support, reflective scheduling, psychosocial counseling, and spiritual health to encourage sustainable adaptation and holistic student well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The boarding education system is ideal because it can optimize students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor realms (Manaf, 2022). As one of the educational models, the boarding system is not new in the world of education and has deep roots in the history of human learning. Historically, the concept of boarding has been existed for centuries, when parents in the UK sent their children to boarding schools (Cavenagh et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2022). Likewise, similar concepts existed during the time of the Prophet (Bahauddin, 2021; Rehman, 2023). In its development, "Suffah" transformed into a more advanced educational concept during the Khulafa Arrasyidin period. In the Indonesian context, the boarding school system developed through the adaptation of the Islamic traditional boarding school model, whose origin cannot be separated from the influence of Walisongo in the 15th – 16th centuries in Java (Jajuli et al., 2022), and gradually became a more modern educational institution over time (Kosim et al., 2023; Sabila et al., 2024).

State Islamic University of Sheikh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan is one of the higher education institutions that has adopted the concept of boarding for students during their first year. This policy has been implemented since the issuance of the Decree of the Rector of IAIN Padangsidempuan Number 136 of 2015 concerning the obligation to live in *Ma'had al-Jami'ah*. The concept of boarding education aims to shape character through positive personality traits, which reflect personal identity and generate positive outcomes and manage difficulties such as conflict, anxiety, and stress (Douwes et al., 2023; Russo-Netzer et al., 2023). The programs implemented are aligned to the vision, consisting of coaching and strengthening in the field of the Qur'an, character building, worship, Arabic, and English (Arifin, 2024).

Efforts to realize this vision are integrated into an organized curriculum through routine activities in the boarding school. However, in its implementation, many students cannot adapt well, affecting their well-being and academic success (Faria & Almeida, 2020; Lee et al. 2024). Educational facilities are also expected to significantly influence the adaptation process and student well-being (Uline, 2022). Students who are categorized as being in the late adolescent transition phase tend to be vulnerable to mental health disorders. If left untreated, these disorders may recur in subsequent developmental periods (McDaid & Park, 2011; Povey et al., 2022; Reza et al., 2024). This phenomenon is reinforced by findings that adolescents who do not receive timely psychological support are vulnerable to maladaptive behaviors such as self-harm or social withdrawal (Hasking et al., 2017).

Unpleasant campus conditions can impact individual assessments of the fulfillment of student needs. Konu and Rimpelä (2002) developed the concept of school well-being in a conceptual model that considers various aspects, such as material conditions and impersonal conditions (having), social relations (Loving), personal growth (Being), and health status. A holistic, comprehensive, and interdisciplinary understanding of the well-being aspects of school settings is a conceptual foundation for providing information on students' overall life satisfaction that benefits the well-being of students (Diener, 2009; Norozi, 2023).

Adaptation is a process of self-adjustment to a new environment that involves changes in various aspects of life, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through targeted efforts (Clinciu, 2013; Sari & Suryana, 2024). Adaptation in campus life consists of four aspects: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment (Lomberg & Jordaan, 2024; Ren et al., 2024). In academic adaptation, students must have good time management skills and seek academic guidance (Baalmann, 2024; Leow et al., 2024; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Social adaptation involves adjusting to a new social environment, including building relationships and seeking social support. Strong social support from friends, family, and campus staff can speed up the adaptation process and reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation (Acoba, 2024; Chaudhry et al., 2024; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Emotional adaptation through effective emotion regulation is essential for reducing the negative impact of stress and improving overall well-being (Gross, 2002; Kozubal et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2023). Institutional adaptation refers to students' attachment to the university. The results of the study showed that unpleasant school experiences are a source of stress and reduce students' quality of life (McCullough et al., 2000; Ningsih, 2024). It is closely related to adapting when individuals enter a new environment.

Therefore, first-year students must manage their stress healthily through exercise and a good diet (Sax, 2008). Failure to adapt can negatively impact their academic and personal well-being. Generally, failure to adapt is triggered by discomfort with a new environment, difficulty socializing, being alone, and fear of starting a conversation (Nasir, 2023). Other studies highlight that the factors

that influence self-adjustment consist of physical, psychological, and environmental conditions, and the level of religiosity and culture (Schneiders, 1964). The aspect of religiosity and spirituality is a study often associated with health and shows religion's positive impact (Al-Nuaimi & Qoronfleh, 2022; Cotton et al., 2006; Koenig, 2012). In addition, other factors that affect adaptation generally consist of frustration, which is a process causing a person to feel that there is an obstacle to fulfilling their needs or the denial that something will happen that gets in the way of their desires. Anxiety is a manifestation of a variety of mixed emotional processes.

In the Islamic context, self-adjustment is closely related to the principles governing how a Muslim deals with various aspects of life, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. Thus, adaptation must be based on the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the thoughts of scholars as every individual's behavior, relationship with others, welfare, and all human experiences, including various deviations that occur, must refer to the Qur'an (Elzamzamy et al., 2024; Rassool, 2023). Allah SWT in QS (17:15):

"Whoever is guided is only guided for [the benefit of] his soul. And whoever errs only errs against it. And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And never would We punish until We sent a messenger"

Then, in Surah 2:286:

"Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity. It will have [the consequence of] what [good] it has gained, and it will bear [the consequence of] what [evil] it has earned. "Our Lord, do not impose blame upon us if we have forgotten or erred. Our Lord, and lay not upon us a burden like that which You laid upon those before us. Our Lord, and burden us not with that which we have no ability to bear. And pardon us; and forgive us; and have mercy upon us. You are our protector, so give us victory over the disbelieving people."

From the above two verses, self-adjustment in Islam not only involves adapting to changes and challenges but also includes acceptance and awareness of Allah's provisions and the development of good character. Al-Ghazali further emphasized the importance of *Tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and *Ihsān* (doing good) as part of the process of self-adjustment (Hanafani & Hambali, 2023). True self-adjustment involves adjusting to Islamic moral and spiritual norms and self-control of desires. This concept is closely related to the attitude of dependence on Allah SWT (*Tawakkul*), patience, gratitude, maintaining sincere intentions, balance, and prioritizing good morals.

New students who take part in the educational process at UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan come from different backgrounds. Educationally, new students come from general education and religious education. These differences in characteristics directly or indirectly affect their adaptability and impacts the rate of resignation from boarding programs due to the inability to adapt to the existing system. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how new students at Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan adapt through boarding activities in the academic year 2024/2025. The study offers novelty by contextualizing the school well-being frameworks originally developed in Western contexts within an Islamic boarding university in Indonesia. By integrating the dimensions of school well-being with the lived experiences of students in boarding environments, this research contributes to expanding the theoretical and practical understanding of student adaptability in faith-based higher education.

METHODS

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how first-year boarding students at UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary make sense of their adaptation to

dormitory life. IPA was chosen because it allows researchers to capture how participants interpret and give meaning to their lived experiences within a specific cultural and religious context (Lim, 2025). The focus was not on frequency or generalization but on the depth of individual sense-making. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, emphasizing how students construct personal meaning from their boarding experiences (Love et al., 2020).

To answer the research question about the adaptation process of new students, this study involved 11 boarding students and one boarding supervisor, selected through purposive sampling with a non-probability technique based on participant characteristics relevant to the research focus (Raifman et al., 2022). In qualitative research, particularly within the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, the objective is to achieve depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, a small and homogeneous sample is methodologically appropriate because it allows for an intensive and nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Following the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), the inclusion of 12 participants is considered sufficient, given the study's focused aim, clear theoretical orientation, and strong participant-researcher dialogue. The presence of the boarding supervisor as a key informant further strengthens the contextual validity of the data by providing a complementary perspective on student adaptation within the dormitory environment.

All informants voluntarily participated in direct interviews designed to explore their lived experiences through open-ended questions (Azwar, 2015; Hansen & Świdarska, 2023). The interview protocol included questions about 1) Personal biodata, 2) How the adaptation process unfolds and the time needed, 3) What supports the adaptation process in the boarding school, 4) How friends, managers, and parents support boarding-school life, 5) What factors support the adaptation process in boarding school life, 6) How the services provided by the boarding school function (e.g., rooms, classrooms, bathrooms, food, and health facilities).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and triangulated to enhance the theoretical and interpretative robustness of the findings across sources, techniques, and time (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). Source triangulation was conducted by cross-verifying student responses with the dormitory supervisor's account, while technique triangulation integrated observational notes with interview data from multiple participants. Time triangulation was implemented by reconfirming participant responses at different intervals to ensure data consistency and validity. Through these validation strategies, the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were systematically reinforced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data provided an initial overview of student adaptation to the boarding environment. Data were collected during the two-month dormitory program and showed that 20 students (1.3%) withdrew from the total of 1,497 enrolled students during the observation period (Table 1). While this percentage appears relatively small, the uneven distribution of dropouts across dormitories indicates that adaptation challenges are not uniform. Dormitories such as F-1 and E-1 recorded higher withdrawal numbers (five and four students, respectively), suggesting localized issues related to adaptation to social norms, communal routines, or institutional regulations. These statistics served not merely as enrollment data but as an entry point to examine the dynamics of adjustment that occur within the boarding environment, both structurally and psychologically.

Table 1*Number of Active Boarding Students*

No	Boarding house	Number of Students	Out of school	Latest Numbers
1	A	97	1	96
2	B	100	0	100
3	C	79	1	78
4	D-1	159	1	158
5	D-2	168	1	167
6	D-3	134	2	132
7	E-1	140	4	136
8	E-2	156	0	156
9	E-3	111	0	111
10	F-1	84	5	79
11	F-2	92	2	90
12	F-3	73	1	72
13	G	104	2	102
Total		1497	20	1477

*) Ma'had Jami'ah internal data based on the update on September 27, 2024

Meanwhile, based on research data, 11 students and one boarding school manager were interviewed, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2*Respondent Information*

No	Respondent's Initials	Gender	Type of School Origin
1	Is	Woman	High School
2	Ma	Woman	Islamic Boarding School
3	El	Woman	Vocational High School
4	Mot	Woman	High School
5	Par	Man	High School
6	Ha	Woman	High School
7	Ri	Woman	Vocational High School
8	Hide	Woman	High School
9	Mar	Man	Islamic Boarding School
10	Azh	Man	Islamic Boarding School
11	Mir	Woman	Islamic Boarding School
12	Li	Woman	Boarding school Manager

Following data collection, interview transcripts were carefully coded, analyzed, and grouped thematically to identify patterns in students' adaptation experiences. Thematic saturation was reached when no new categories emerged from the interviews, ensuring data adequacy and credibility. The analysis followed Smith et al. (2022) stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA),

including reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, and identifying patterns across cases. Thematic analysis followed the framework of school well-being (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002), which comprises four main dimensions: “having, loving, being, and health”. Supplemented by an emergent fifth dimension, religiosity, that arose from contextual findings.

The four core dimensions capture the multi-layered experience of adaptation; “having” represents material and institutional aspects that support or hinder adjustment; “loving” captures the quality of social relationships that foster belonging; “being” refers to students’ self-growth and self-realization within boarding; “health” encompasses both physical and mental well-being as integral to adaptation; and “religiosity” emerged as a spiritual resource that provides meaning, endurance, and resilience. A summary of the major themes which emerged from this analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Interview Themes Based on School Well-Being Framework

Dimension	General themes	Custom themes
Having	Facilities, food, environment	Poor bathroom facilities and limited water; monotonous food menu; multi-storey dormitories and fluctuating room temperatures
Loving	Social relationships	Peer and parental support enhance motivation; dormitory managers assist early orientation
Being	Boarding Curriculum	Qur’an deepening, worship practice, and language learning strengthen self-discipline but cause fatigue for non-pesantren students
Health	Health & Counseling	Lack of health and counseling services; limited sports activities; inadequate rest time (6-7 hours daily)
Religiosity	Spiritual coping	Religious practice increases patience, gratitude, and moral strength; faith acts as a coping mechanism for stress

From the research conducted, the interviews showed the relationship between the adaptation process and the school well-being of boarding school students, with the addition of religiosity as one of the influential dimensions-strengthened through the results of interviews with managers who stated that the policies implemented in the boarding school were not based on research and do not involve students in formulating policies in the boarding school. Exploring student adaptation can be used as a policy basis to improve the school well-being of boarding students at UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan.

This research highlighted the experience of new students' adaptation to boarding school life. The findings of the study can be classified based on the dimensions of school well-being as follows:

The Meaning of Having: Material Conditions and Adaptation

Material and physical conditions constitute one of the most fundamental factors influencing student adaptation. All participants consistently mentioned that bathroom conditions and water supply were inadequate. As one student expressed, “*pasokan air dan fasilitas kamar mandi cukup buruk dan*

tidak memenuhi kebutuhan selama di asrama" ("The water supply and bathroom facilities are quite poor and do not meet the needs during our stay in the dormitory") (R. Aprilia, personal communication, September 13, 2024). Similarly, the monotonous food menu affected satisfaction and motivation to engage in academic and religious activities.

Although these issues appear practical, their psychological implications are significant. Prior studies have confirmed that inadequate living facilities reduce motivation, increase stress, and hinder academic focus (Li & Lee, 2025; Yoon & Backer, 2025). Moreover, food monotony can diminish emotional well-being and disrupt routines of gratitude and mindfulness that are integral to Islamic boarding education (Firth et al., 2020). These material insufficiencies thus affect not only students' physical comfort but also their emotional readiness and perception of institutional care.

Nevertheless, some students demonstrated high intentional resilience, viewing these material limitations as spiritual trials. They cited QS. Al-Insyirah: 5-6 "Indeed with hardship comes ease", as a personal reminder of divine balance between struggle and relief. This interpretation illustrates how religious meaning-making transforms discomfort into faith-based strength (Siregar et al., 2024). Hence, adaptation within the *having* dimension is not merely physical but also spiritual, representing a process of reframing material insufficiency into psychological acceptance and gratitude that sustain motivation.

The Meaning of Loving: Social Relationships as Adaptive Capital

The loving dimension highlights the significance of interpersonal bonds as emotional capital that supports adaptation. Most respondents reported that social relationships, especially with peers, played the most decisive role in their adjustment process. A student noted, "*Teman dan orang tua merupakan sumber dukungan sosial yang paling utama selama berada di asrama. Selain itu, mahasiswi dan pengelola asrama juga sering membantu*" ("Friends and parents are the most important sources of social support while in the dormitory. In addition, students and dormitory administrators are also often helpful") (Isma, personal communication, September 13, 2024). These relationships fostered a sense of belonging and mitigated the loneliness that often accompanies the transition into a new environment.

This pattern aligns with research showing that social support predicts successful adaptation among adolescents, particularly in structured communal settings (De Camargo et al., 2023; Fuligni, 2019; Stockinger et al., 2021; Turkpouir & Mehdinezhad, 2016). The Introduction to Academic Culture and Student Affairs program at UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan provided early exposure to campus norms and boarding routines, which reduced anxiety and facilitated social integration. Friendships built through shared meals, study sessions, and worship enhanced solidarity and encouraged mutual emotional regulation. In many cases, peer empathy replaced the familial comfort that students temporarily left behind.

From an Islamic psychological perspective, these social ties are not only emotional connections, but also moral commitments rooted in *ukhuwah islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood). Religiosity and social support mutually reinforce well-being by cultivating empathy, belonging, and a sense of moral accountability (Długosz et al., 2022; Khuzaimah et al., 2023). Therefore, the loving dimension extends beyond interpersonal warmth; it evolves into a spiritual framework that sustains adaptive behavior through collective worship, moral companionship, and shared responsibility in pursuing communal harmony.

The Meaning of Being: Self-Formation and Internal Balance

The being dimension captures students' self-actualization and moral identity formation as outcomes of sustained participation in boarding programs. Activities such as Qur'an memorization, daily worship, character-building sessions, and language training foster a sense of discipline and spiritual purpose. Most participants acknowledged that these programs contributed to significant personal transformation, enhancing their self-regulation, time management, and moral awareness. However, these positive effects coexisted with psychological tension stemming from fatigue and overcommitment.

Students from a general education background (high school or vocational school) tend to experience more difficulty adjusting to the highly structured schedules. As one participant stated, "*Jadwal yang padat dan fasilitas yang terbatas mengakibatkan saya merasa kelelahan*" ("*The busy schedule and limited facilities left me feeling exhausted*") (H. Adelina, personal communication, September 13, 2024). Conversely, pesantren alumni viewed the same routines as manageable, suggesting that prior exposure to religious boarding systems strengthens adaptive readiness. This divergence highlighted the role of prior habituation and cultural capital in shaping adaptability and perceived stress (Grissom & Bhatnagar, 2009; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

The tension between personal growth and exhaustion indicates that institutional structure and individual agency must remain in dynamic equilibrium. Excessive discipline without recovery time may undermine the very resilience it seeks to cultivate. Studies confirm that sleep quality and rest significantly affect students' ability to manage stress and maintain concentration (Peng et al., 2023). Therefore, the being dimension in this context should be interpreted as a dialectical process, an ongoing negotiation between self-discipline and self-care, between institutional demands and personal well-being.

The Meaning of Health: Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Equilibrium

Participants consistently emphasized the absence of comprehensive health and counseling services in the boarding school. This structural gap limited access to professional assistance for both physical complaints and emotional distress. Given that the adaptation phase often involves anxiety, homesickness, and stress regulation, the lack of psychological support can impede student well-being and academic focus. This condition underscores that the health dimension of school well-being has not been adequately fulfilled in this institutional setting.

In the Islamic perspective, *Ṣiḥḥah* (health) encompasses physical, psychological, and spiritual harmony rather than mere bodily fitness. Pesantren-based counseling models, which integrate the principle of *al-Tawāzun* (balance) and the dual goodness of *al-Dunyā ḥasanah* (worldly well-being) and *al-Ākhirah ḥasanah* (spiritual well-being), can provide a culturally relevant approach to holistic care (Arifin & Baharun, 2023). Such frameworks emphasize emotional purification, gratitude, and spiritual mindfulness as preventive measures against mental fatigue.

Additionally, the limited schedule for physical exercise (typically once per week) reduces opportunities for stress recovery and physiological rejuvenation. Evidence confirms that regular physical activity is positively correlated with psychological well-being, academic engagement, and emotional resilience (Kovalenko et al., 2020). Thus, expanding health services, implementing structured counseling, and incorporating routine exercise are essential not only to prevent burnout but also to cultivate adaptive stability that aligns with Islamic principles of balance and self-care.

The Role of Religiosity: A Culturally Embedded Adaptive Resource

Although religiosity is not part of Konu & Rimpelä's (2002) original framework, this study identified it as an emergent yet central dimension of adaptation. Participants' narratives revealed that faith served as their primary coping mechanism during the adjustment to dormitory life. One student stated that boarding school was not initially his/her personal choice but a means to honor parental expectations, demonstrating *birr al-wālidayn* (filial piety). Another, a *Hāfiẓ al-Qur'ān*, shared that all challenges were met with *ikhlas* (sincerity) and *tawakkul* (trust in God's plan), transforming stress into spiritual growth.

These findings aligned with the concept of spiritual coping (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004), which posits that religiosity provides meaning to hardship and enhances emotional endurance. In this context, faith functions as both a mediator and a moderator between the being and health dimensions. It strengthens internal locus of control, enhances emotion regulation, and encourages positive reinterpretation of difficulties through *ṣabr*, *shukr*, and *ikhhlās* (Susanti & Nastiti, 2022).

Consequently, religiosity acts as a psychological and cultural safeguard that enables students to find purpose and equilibrium in challenging circumstances. This integration of spiritual consciousness into adaptation emphasizes that student well-being in an Islamic boarding setting cannot be fully understood without recognizing religiosity as the foundation for emotional resilience and moral flourishing.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations. The small, context-specific sample (11 students and one supervisor), a short research duration, and reliance on qualitative interviews restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research should employ mixed-method or longitudinal approaches using validated adaptation and well-being scales to explore the dynamic interplay between religiosity, environment, and psychological resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive understanding of how new students at UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan adapt to boarding life through the lens of school well-being. The findings demonstrated that adaptation is a multifaceted process influenced by material conditions, social connections, personal growth, and health management, with religiosity functioning as an integrative axis that unites these dimensions.

Religiosity manifested through *ikhlas* (sincerity), *sabr* (patience), and *syukur* (gratitude) emerges as a compensatory resource that transforms stress into self-development, especially when material facilities and institutional supports are limited. This highlights that adaptation and well-being in Islamic contexts are best understood as holistic constructs that integrate both material and spiritual dimensions.

Theoretically, this study extends the school well-being framework by proposing religiosity as a culturally embedded fifth dimension that mediates adaptation in Islamic higher education. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of integrating spiritual formation, psychosocial counseling, and institutional support into the boarding management system to promote adaptive, meaningful, and sustainable student well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: The author would like to thank all parties who contributed to this research, especially the director of the Ma'had Jami'ah UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS: MSP and FR designed the study, collected data, analyzed the data, and drafted the research report. UF analyzed the transcripts and the overall results. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: The authors declare no conflicts of interest, whether financial, institutional, or personal, pertaining to any aspect of this research from its conception to publication.

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