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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Openness to experience and innovative work behavior: workplace politics harms the innovativeness of those low on openness

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BACKGROUND
Work innovation is essential to both employee and organizational success in today's highly competitive work environment. Although scholars have found personality (e.g., openness to experience) to relate to innovative work behavior, only some research has examined how context might influence personality's effects, and very few studies have examined work environments (e.g., workplace politics) that could be detrimental to innovative behavior.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE
Taking a trait activation approach, across two time points, we examined how openness affects the perceptions of organizational politics (POP)–innovative work behavior relationship using a sample of employees and supervisors working in a variety of finance sectors.

RESULTS
The results revealed that innovative work behaviors, as rated by managers both concurrently and six months later, decrease for employees low on openness under conditions of elevated POP, but are not reduced for those high on openness under high POP. Thus, the (only) employees whose innovative behavior was negatively affected were those who were otherwise least prone to engage in work innovation (i.e., those low on openness), indicating the harmful effect of workplace politics on this valuable work behavior.

CONCLUSIONS
These findings suggest that scholars should develop a more nuanced understanding of openness's long-established relationship with innovation at work, paying particular attention to the context of their openness studies.

KEY WORDS
openness to experience; perceptions of organizational politics; innovative work behavior; trait activation

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BACKGROUND

Employee innovation has been described as "the intentional creation, introduction and application of new ideas within a work role, group or organization, in order to benefit role performance, the group, or the organization" (Janssen, 2000, p. 288). Over the years, work innovation has attracted substantial research attention, suggesting that it provides a robust explanation for individual effectiveness (Ng et al., 2010; Ng & Feldman, 2013; Yuan & Woodman, 2010). One critical way for organizations and individuals to gain a competitive advantage is innovative work behavior (Anderson et al., 2014; Shalley & Gilson, 2004), and, therefore, a thorough understanding of its antecedents is especially valuable.

One of the more widely studied predictors, openness to experience (Costa & McCrae, 1992), has been meta-analytically related to work innovation (e.g., Hammond et al., 2011). However, the (positive) relationship has not been consistently shown across studies, leaving further work to be done on the boundary conditions of personality's relationship with innovation (Javed et al., 2020). Furthermore, few innovation studies have taken a trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003) perspective, and scholars have called for additional research into the situational influences on innovation (Zhang et al., 2020). Finally, although some studies have assessed contextual factors in innovation, limited research has focused on factors that are *detrimental* to individual innovation at work. Since employees have a range of openness and most professional roles expect at least a modest degree of innovation, it is a crucial oversight that scholars have not yet identified how those who are not high on openness can be discouraged from innovative behaviors at work.

Therefore, our research examines how openness to experience moderates the perceptions of organizational politics (POP)–innovative work behavior relationship. In line with prior scholarship (e.g., Hochwarter et al., 2010, 2020), we characterize the experience of POP as demanding for employees, arguing that POP is an activating work context for (low) openness to experience. Based on prior research (e.g., Piedmont et al., 2012) and taking a trait activation approach (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we suggest that, when in the presence of heightened politics at work, those low on openness eschew social interaction, leading to decreased innovative behavior. Collecting innovative work behavior ratings by employees' supervisors both concurrently and six months later, our findings support our contention, resulting in one of the few studies that point to a situational (i.e., POP) and personality (i.e., low openness) factor that can decrease employee work innovation.

OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE AND INNOVATION

Although those high on openness to experience question assumptions, engage in divergent thinking, and create new ideas, those who are low prefer the familiar, are described as conventional, and lack spontaneity (Costa & McCrae, 1992). However, the relationship of openness with important work criteria remains unclear (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Many have argued that personality acquires its meaning only within an activating context (Tett & Burnett, 2003), and, in the broader organizational literature, context has been recognized as an important element in shaping employee behavior (Johns, 2006). Thus, we believe that pairing openness with both a context (i.e., POP) and outcome (i.e., innovative work behaviors) that are relevant to it should help to elucidate its relationship with work behavior.

Multiple meta-analyses have shown openness to be related to innovation at work (e.g., Feist, 1998; Hammond et al., 2011), though the results have not been entirely consistent, due to the presence of boundary conditions (Javed et al., 2020). Moreover, although early scholarship suggested that enhanced innovative behavior is best (positively) predicted via an interaction of person and situation antecedents (Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1990), scholars continue to request more investigations into contextual factors in innovation research (Zhang et al., 2020). For instance, one study found that, in the context of musicians, where creative innovative behavior is an important part of the role, openness scores were higher than in non-musicians (Gjermunds et al., 2020). What remains almost entirely unanswered are the contexts that lead to *reduced* innovative work behaviors (for exception, see Ng & Feldman, 2013). Thus, in response to this call, our study investigated a potential contextual hindrance (i.e., POP) to the openness–innovative work behavior relationship.

PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AND INNOVATION

Perceived organizational politics (POP) at work represents a subjective judgment about how much the workplace is characterized by coworkers engaging in self-serving behavior (Ferris et al., 2019). Much of POP research views it as aversive (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011), and evidence indicates that it places great demands on employees (Ferris et al., 2019; Hochwarter et al., 2020).

Although an early organizational politics study demonstrated that the presence of heightened politics was related to employees evaluating the organization as being less supportive of innovation (Parker et al., 1995), subsequent scholarship has not examined the relationship, nor has it investigated innova-

tive work behavior by employees. However, there is much remaining to be learned about POP (Maher et al., 2021), and we believe that POP is particularly relevant to the openness–innovative work behavior relationship.

THE INTERPLAY OF OPENNESS, INNOVATION, AND POP

Some have suggested that only when an organization provides an enabling context will employees be innovative at work (Taggar, 2002; Zare & Flinchbaugh, 2019). Prior research has almost exclusively focused on such *facilitative* correlates of innovative work behavior (e.g., climate for innovation; Park et al., 2018), and, with few exceptions (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2013) not investigated factors that diminish innovation. We argue that elevated POP is an activating context for openness (Tett & Burnett, 2003), because of the pressure to adapt to social demands, which is something that those low on openness are less willing to do (Piedmont et al., 2012).

It has been suggested that low openness results in greater social disconnection (Piedmont et al., 2012). Although little work has been conducted examining the dysfunctional elements of low openness (Piedmont et al., 2012), we believe that the social pressures of POP would compel those low on openness to disengage from work's social environment even further, resulting in reduced innovation in such contexts. For instance, as opposed to those high on openness, those low on openness are more likely to interpret social cues as dangerous (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Similarly, research has found them to be cognitively inflexible to social demands (Perry & Sibley, 2013), and also more likely to characterize stressful social information (e.g., high POP) as threatening (Sibley & Duckitt, 2013). However, successful adaptation to a highly political environment requires careful attention to workplace social expectations, especially those that are unstated. This inflexibility in the presence of social pressure creates a disconnection from social groups, making it more difficult to adapt to changes in the social context (Piedmont et al., 2012). Thus, by interpreting an interpersonally demanding work environment (e.g., highly political workplace) as a threat, those who are less open become much more likely to refrain from the risk-taking that is necessarily a part of innovative work behavior. In other words, these individuals who, outside of this environment, are disinclined to innovate (i.e., those low on openness) would engage in even less innovation when they perceive politics at work. Therefore, we argue:

Hypothesis: Openness will moderate the POP–innovative work behavior relationship, such that, when openness is low, POP will negatively relate to innovative work behavior.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Our sample consisted of full-time employees working in various jobs (e.g., administrative support, customer service, and investment management) in banking companies in Greece. Departmental managers informed potential participants about the survey, assuring employees that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential with the researchers. Participants received a physical questionnaire and an envelope, and surveys were completed during work breaks. Completed questionnaires were placed in a locked box in the reception area or returned directly to the researchers within approximately two weeks after distribution. We excluded those who had less than 3 months of work experience from receiving a survey. Employees and their managers participated in our study at two different points in time. To create employee-supervisor dyads, we placed a code on the first page of each questionnaire, so that we could match (employee) Time 1 and (supervisor) Time 1 and 2 surveys. Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), we calculated a required sample size of 115 for a power of $1\text{-}\beta = .80$ ($\alpha = .05$) (Cohen, 1988).

For the Time 1 survey, of the 550 employee surveys distributed, 241 employees returned completed questionnaires. Employees reported measures of POP, personality and demographics, and managers assessed employee innovative behavior. Matched data were available for 215 employees, resulting from 50 managers. The employee sample was 52% male and the mean age was 39.80 ($SD = 9.24$) years.

This study was conducted in the context of a national financial crisis that greatly affected the banking and finance sectors and the supervisors working in it. Therefore, supervisors were hesitant to participate in the study, especially because our questionnaire contained items about organizational politics and innovation, which were sensitive issues at that time. Moreover, the additional work pressures placed on Greek financial professionals made even the brief time commitment of completing the survey to be a challenge. Therefore, an interval of 6 months between the two (Time 1 and Time 2) surveys allowed the Time 2 survey to be administered once the height of the crisis began to recede, ensuring that the financial crisis did not affect our findings.

Six months later, a survey (Time 2) was distributed to supervisors, which included supervisor ratings of employee innovative behavior. Of the 215 employees and 50 managers who completed the Time 1 survey, 121 employee-supervisor dyads completed the Time 2 survey, resulting from 30 supervisors. Using only those employee (Time 1) surveys that were matched with supervisor (Time 2) surveys, these employees averaged 40.30 years of age ($SD = 9.55$), and the sample was 57% male.

MEASURES

A five-point response Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) was used for all measures in this study. All items that were originally written in English were translated into the Greek language by two academic experts following the translation and back-translation process (Brislin, 1980) to ensure the translation's equivalence and the readability of the translated items. All items and constructs were presented in random order.

Employee-assessed

POP. We used a twelve-item scale developed by Kacmar and Carlson (1997) to measure POP: the Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS). A sample item from this scale is "Favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead in this organization". To make the items more relatable for employees, the phrase "organization" was replaced with "bank". Cronbach's alpha was α = . 81 at Time 1 and α = .82 in the Time 2 sample.

Openness to experience. We measured openness using the Big Five inventory (BFI) 7-item scale developed by John and Srivastava (1999). A sample item is "Is original, comes up with new ideas". Cronbach's alpha was α = .70 at Time 1 and α = .67 in the Time 2 sample.

Control variables. We controlled for age and gender because prior findings suggested that employees differ in their interpretations of and reactions to politics based on their demographics (Hochwarter et al., 2020). We also controlled for the effects of the four other Big Five personality traits using the Big Five inventory (BFI) scale developed by John and Srivastava (1999). Each dimension was assessed using 7 items. Sample items include "I am talkative" (extraversion), "I am a reliable worker" (conscientiousness), "I worry a lot" (neuroticism), and "I am helpful and unselfish with others" (agreeableness; α = .74).

Supervisor-assessed

Employee innovative work behavior (INNWB; Time 1 and Time 2). We measured innovative work behavior using an 8-item INNWB scale developed for this study (see Supplementary materials). Item include "Is an innovator", "Pursues creative ideas and promoting those ideas to the colleagues in the bank", "Spends a lot of time at work to develop plans for implementing new ideas", "Applies new strategies to the job in this bank", "Adopts novel solutions for conventional problems in this bank", "At work, is trying to solve the same problems in different ways than others", "Does not hesitate to challenge the status quo of the bank", and "Is open and responsive to changes provided by the department". Cronbach's alpha was α = .87 at Time 1 and α = .91 at Time 2.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS OF VARIABLES

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables at both Time 1 (above the diagonal) and Time 2 (below the diagonal). At Time 1, POP negatively correlated with extraversion (r = −.21, p = .002) and agreeableness (r = −.14, p = .034), but positively correlated with neuroticism (r = .22, p = .001). Openness to experiences significantly correlated with other personality traits (extraversion r = .40, p < .001; conscientiousness r = .34, p < .001), and POP had a significant negative relationship with INNWB (r = −.18, p = .009). Using only those employee-supervisor dyads where supervisors completed Time 2 (N = 121, below the diagonal), POP had similar relationships as Time 1 with other variables, including a negative relationship with INNWB (r = −.21, p = .022).

Our hypothesis stated that POP would have a negative relationship with INNWB at low levels of openness. To test the moderated effects, we used multiple hierarchical regression (Cohen & Cohen, 1983), and our dataset did not appear to violate any regression assumptions (e.g., normal distribution of variables). After entering our control variables (i.e., age, gender, extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness) and the main effects of POP and Openness, we entered an interaction term of POP × Openness. To reduce multicollinearity, our predictors were mean-centered prior to creating the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991).

Supporting the hypothesis, our results demonstrated a significant POP × Openness interaction effect on innovative behavior at both Time 1 and Time 2. Results for the regression analyses on the Time 1 survey (N = 215) are found in Table 2. The moderating impact of openness on the relationship between POP and innovative work behavior was significant (Table 2, Model c; β = .19, p < .005, ΔR^2 = .04). Results for the analyses on the Time 2 survey (N = 121) are found in Table 3. The POP × Openness interaction was significant, accounting for incremental variance in INNWB (β = .25, p = .009, ΔR^2 = .05).

The results show that the four dimensions of personality as controls did not explain significant variance in INNWB. Further, neither the direction nor the strength of the interaction term changed regardless of the use of control variables. To examine the form of this interaction, analyses were conducted via the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018), using a procedure advocated by Aiken and West (1991). For Time 1 (N = 215), the results revealed that POP was negatively related to INNWB for low levels of openness (β = −.43, SE = .10, t = −4.12, p < .001), but unrelated for high lev-

Table 1

Mean, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables for Time 1 and Time 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	–	−.03	−.01	−.02	−.09	−.03	−.09	.13*	−.18**
2. Gender	−.11	–	.12	.03	−.21**	−.07	.22**	−.14*	−.00
3. Extraversion^{SR}	.16	−.09	–	.18**	−.02	.40**	.34**	−.17*	.08
4. Conscientiousness^{SR}	.06	.08	.35**	–	−.05	.07	.27**	.51**	−.37**
5. Neuroticism^{SR}	.17	.14	−.47**	−.34**	–	.10	.13	−.38**	−.33**
6. Agreeableness^{SR}	−.04	−.00	.36**	.56**	−.41**	–	−.03	.06	.33**
7. Openness^{SR}	.26**	−.01	.37**	.35**	−.10	.13	–	.02	.02
8. POP^{SR}	.22*	.06	−.28**	−.07	.39**	−.25**	.02	–	−.23**
9. Innovative work^{MR}	−.08	.02	.03	−.13	.00	−.12	.13	−.21*	–
Time 1 *M*	39.79	1.48	3.39	4.01	2.79	3.65	3.64	3.00	3.05
Time 1 *SD*	9.24	0.50	0.63	0.64	0.65	0.72	0.61	0.73	0.76
Time 2 *M*	40.37	1.42	3.30	4.07	2.72	3.70	3.66	2.84	3.04
Time 2 *SD*	9.55	0.49	0.63	0.67	0.72	0.73	0.58	0.72	0.81

Note. Time 1 (N = 215); Time 2 (N = 121). Sample 1 is provided above the diagonal. Sample 2 is provided below the diagonal. SR – self-reported; MR – manager-reported; POP – perceived organizational politics. For gender: 1 – male, 2 – female. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

Table 2

The moderating impact of openness on innovative work behavior (Time 1)

	INNWB			INNWB			INNWB		
	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*
Control variables									
Age	−.03	.01	.709	−.04	.01	.539	−.04	.01	.561
Gender	.01	.11	.887	.02	.12	.792	.01	.10	.848
Extraversion	−.01	.09	.934	−.12	.09	.149	−.12	.09	.121
Conscientiousness	−.08	.10	.346	−.13	.10	.108	−.15	.01	.076
Neuroticism	−.09	.09	.257	−.06	.09	.465	.06	.09	.456
Agreeableness	−.08	.09	.314	−.06	.09	.449	−.03	.09	.670
Main effects									
POP				−.20*	.07	.004			
Openness				.23*	.10	.003			
Moderating interaction effects									
POP							−.24**	.07	.001
Openness							.25**	.11	.001
POP × Openness							.19**	.10	.005
R^2	.02			.09				.13	
ΔR^2	.02			.07				.04	

Note. N = 215; all coefficients are standardized β; $SE_{(B)}$ – standard error of unstandardized β. INNWB – innovative work behavior; $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

Table 3

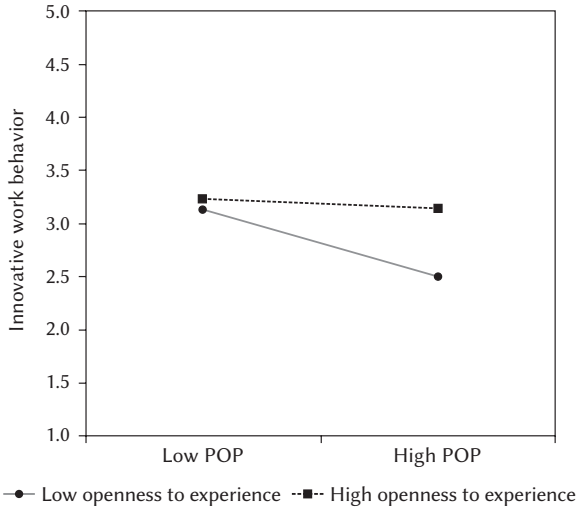
The moderating impact of openness on innovative work behavior (Time 2)

	INNWB			INNWB			INNWB		
	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*	β	$SE_{(B)}$	*p*
Control variables									
Age	−.09	.01	.351	−.09	.00	.387	−.05	.00	.584
Gender	.03	.15	.719	.04	.15	.683	.07	.15	.409
Extraversion	.12	.14	.305	−.00	.15	.978	−.02	.14	.871
Conscientiousness	−.11	.14	.334	−.15	.14	.216	−.15	.14	.184
Neuroticism	−.02	.13	.878	.03	.13	.776	.06	.12	.609
Agreeableness	−.11	.13	.339	−.12	.12	.282	−.08	.12	.477
Main effects									
POP				−.25*	.11	.014			
Openness				.23*	.14	.026			
Moderating interaction effects									
POP							−.35**	.12	.001
Openness							.25*	.14	.012
POP × Openness							.25**	.17	.009
R^2	.04			.12				.18	
ΔR^2	.04			.08				.05	

Note. N = 121; all coefficients are standardized β; $SE_{(B)}$ – standard error of unstandardized β. INNWB – innovative work behavior; *p < .05, **p < .01.

Figure 1

Interactive effect of openness and POP on innovative work behavior (Time 1)



Note. POP – perceptions of organizational politics.

els (β = −.06, *SE* = .08, *t* = −0.71, *p* = .478). Similarly, for Time 2 (*N* = 121), POP was negatively associated with INNWB for low levels of openness (β = −.33, *SE* = .11, *t* = −2.90, *p* = .004), but unrelated at high openness levels (β = −.06, *SE* = .10, *t* = −0.62, *p* = .537).

The interaction plots for both Time 1 and Time 2 were consistent with our hypothesis (e.g., see Figure 1), indicating that POP had a negative relationship with INNWB only when openness to experience was low.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine a model that tests whether the impact of POP on innovative work behaviors (INNWB) varies among employees based on their degree of openness. We hypothesized that only those with low openness would have decreased INNWB in the presence of greater POP, and our hypothesis was supported, both concurrently and with six months later innovative behavior ratings. Drawing from a trait activation theory perspective (Tett & Burnett, 2003), our results emphasize that not all people are always susceptible to having negative reactions to POP in terms of innovative behavior. Our paper has answered calls to provide a more complete understanding of political work phenomena (Ferris et al., 2019; Hochwarter et al., 2020). Moreover, our research is one of the first to test the socially

maladaptive nature of low openness in work settings (Piedmont et al., 2012), finding that it was related to reduced INNWB in the presence of heightened work politics. Concerning theoretical implications, first, we contribute to the literature on the role of openness in work innovation. Prior meta-analytic work has indicated an inconsistent relationship, and our study provides one explanation: scholarship did not take workplace politics into account. Also, with openness being one of the less investigated Big Five factors, our study contributes to the research by being one of the very few studies that examines low openness at work, and our findings support the theoretical argument proposed by others that low openness involves social disconnection (e.g., Piedmont et al., 2012). Additionally, although numerous studies have investigated how context can facilitate work innovation, our study is one of the few to show an environmental factor that can *reduce* innovative behaviors. Furthermore, our study answers calls to identify specific factors that change the experience of workplace politics for employees (e.g., Ferris et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2008). When in a highly political context, although higher levels of openness helped individuals to maintain their levels of innovative behavior, those with lower openness reacted to politics with reduced innovation.

Our study offers practical implications. Since employees have a range of openness levels and even a modest amount of innovation can help organizations, improving our understanding of how those who are predisposed to be only modestly innovative (i.e., low openness individuals) are made to be even more risk averse is a valuable contribution to practice. Also, considering that 88% of managers agreed that most of their activities are political (Kane-Frieder et al., 2014) and that politics is one of the top barriers to job performance (HBR Ascend Staff, 2019), it is important for HR professionals to incorporate appropriate hiring practices focusing on finding and promoting those who are higher on openness. Lastly, organizations need not only to assign highly open employees to complex jobs, but also provide them with a context that does not discourage innovative behavior (Park et al., 2018).

A strength of our study is our use of supervisor-rated, as opposed to self-rated, dependent variables (i.e., innovative work behaviors). Additionally, our dependent variable for Time 2 was collected six months after the other variables were collected and the results were consistent with Time 1, suggesting that these results are not a temporary phenomenon (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Lastly, our study was conducted in Greece, and the relationships found in our study mirrored much of what has been found in studies done in other countries on the constructs of openness, organizational politics, and innovation at work.

Despite its strengths and contributions, the study has limitations. First, although our Time 2 dependent variable (i.e., INNWB) was collected six months later, we are unable to conclusively determine causal relationships among our variables. Future studies may use longitudinal designs (Diefendorff et al., 2021) with repeated measures or experiments (Hauser et al., 2017) to better establish causality in these relationships (Allen et al., 2017). However, given the strong theoretical foundations of our work (e.g., POP; Ferris et al., 2019) and the consistency between our results for Time 1 and Time 2, there should be less concern about reverse causality. Second, collecting self-reports of POP and personality may raise concerns for common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), and future studies could collect coworker ratings of these constructs. Also, since our data were collected during times of a national financial crisis, it is possible that this stressful environment affected the relationships in our study. Future research could examine these relationships outside of such a stressful environment. Finally, our study also did not test the process through which these relationships occur, and future research could explore the cognitive (e.g., creative engagement), relational (e.g., trust), and affective (e.g., anger) processes that affect INNWB.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings revealed that, in a heightened political work context, low levels of openness were related to decreased INNWB, but that INNWB was not reduced for those who scored high on openness. We hope our study reinforces scholarly interest in whether other personality qualities are likely to regulate the impact of POP at work. For instance, researchers could explore the favorable effects of politics on individuals so as to assist with successful navigation of politics at work. In addition, we hope our study prompts scholarship to continue to investigate the maladaptive effects of the social disconnection of those low on openness.

Supplementary materials are available on the journal's website.

Disclosures

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The study was approved by the ethics committee at the Athens University of Economics and Business (no approval number was given).
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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