Journal of Social Research

E-ISSN: 2828-335x
Vol. 5, No. 12, November 2026, pp. 5844-5855
DOI: 10.55324/josr.v5i12.3555
Journal of Social Research

Analysis of the Effectiveness of Upskilling Programs in Improving Agent Performance to Face Market Dynamics

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Keywords:
upskilling; sales agent; transfer training; sales competence; sales performance

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Abstract

The rapidly evolving sales environment requires sales agents to continuously enhance their competencies to respond effectively to changing market demands. However, the effectiveness of upskilling programs in improving job performance remains insufficiently understood, particularly from the perspectives of sales agents themselves. This study aimed to examine the implementation of upskilling programs for sales agents, explore their experiences in applying newly acquired skills during customer interactions, and identify the facilitating factors and barriers influencing the transfer of training to workplace practices amid changing market conditions. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, observations of sales activities, and document analysis involving sales agents and supervisors. The findings revealed that formal training enhanced agents' conceptual understanding of products and sales procedures, while informal knowledge sharing among colleagues reinforced their practical competencies. Nevertheless, the transfer of acquired knowledge and skills into consistent workplace behaviors was not automatic but depended on opportunities for practical application, the quality of supervisory feedback, peer support, and the alignment of training content with actual customer needs and sales situations. Operational constraints, including demanding sales targets and administrative workloads, further limited agents' opportunities to apply newly acquired skills. The study concluded that the effectiveness of upskilling programs should be evaluated through a multidimensional framework encompassing training content relevance, participant comprehension, opportunities for practical application, organizational and peer support, and the transfer of acquired skills to workplace performance, rather than relying exclusively on training attendance or participant satisfaction. These findings provided contextual insights into the development of more effective competency enhancement programs and highlighted the importance of supportive organizational environments in enabling sales agents to apply newly acquired skills and adapt to evolving market conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Sales agents operate in an increasingly dynamic business environment (Claro et al., 2024). Kerr and Marcos-Cuevas (2024) describe sales as a profession undergoing fundamental transformation, particularly in how sales performance is achieved and evaluated. For sales agents, these dynamics are reflected in changing customer needs, intensifying product competition, continuous product updates, and evolving patterns of customer–salesperson interaction. Consequently, relying on a fixed set of competencies over an extended period is no

longer sufficient to meet changing occupational demands (Cramarenco et al., 2023; Pillans, 2024). Kerr and Marcos-Cuevas (2024) categorized the determinants of sales performance into universal, context-dependent, and necessary but insufficient factors. This classification suggests that the effectiveness of competency development programs may vary across organizational settings and should therefore be examined in relation to the specific conditions under which sales agents perform their duties.

In this study, upskilling refers to the enhancement of existing competencies to address evolving job requirements in sales (Pillans, 2024). Selling competencies extend beyond product knowledge to include prospecting, identifying customer needs, presenting appropriate solutions, handling objections, and negotiating (Peasley, 2022). These activities require communication skills, interpersonal judgment, and the ability to adapt to different customer situations. Their effectiveness becomes particularly evident when sales agents apply these competencies during actual customer interactions (Ben Saad & Choura, 2023). Accordingly, the evaluation of upskilling programs should extend beyond participant attendance and post-training satisfaction to examine whether acquired knowledge and skills are transferred to workplace practices (Kim, 2022; Oh & Johnston, 2023). In a study of nursing training programs, Arabi and Garza (2023) demonstrated that appropriately designed training evaluations could inform program improvements and encourage stakeholders to refine their training practices.

The literature on training transfer indicates that the application of acquired knowledge and skills is influenced by factors extending beyond the quality of training programs (Kraiger & Ford, 2021; Mdhlalose, 2022). In their conceptual study, Bhat et al. (2022) categorized the determinants of training transfer into learner characteristics, instructional design, and the work environment, while emphasizing the need for further empirical validation of the proposed framework. Bhurtel and Bhattarai (2023) reported that both internal and external environmental factors influenced training transfer among technical education instructors in Nepal. In a study involving 311 employed adults who participated in soft skills training, Salamon et al. (2022) found that job resources were positively associated with training transfer through work engagement, motivation, and opportunities to apply acquired skills, whereas job demands were negatively associated with transfer. Similarly, Gautam and Basnet (2021) reported that motivation to transfer mediated the relationship between dimensions of organizational culture and training transfer in the higher education sector. Gemmano et al. (2022), in a study involving 164 employees, found that learning culture moderated the relationship between training transfer and three dimensions of job performance: proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity. Collectively, these findings suggest that successful training transfer depends not only on individual learning but also on organizational conditions that facilitate the practical application of acquired competencies (Samad et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature relies on survey-based or conceptual approaches conducted outside the sales sector, providing limited insight into how sales agents interpret and experience competency development programs. Research focusing specifically on sales personnel offers more directly relevant evidence (Singh et al., 2022). Gemmano et al. (2026), in a study involving 111 female sales representatives employed by cosmetics companies, found that informal training transfer activities mediated the relationship between team support for learning and team performance. Peasley (2022), in a study involving 199 salespeople employed by a business-to-business (B2B) company in the United States, reported that high-quality managerial feedback strengthened the relationship between cautiousness and effectiveness in prospecting and customer acquisition. However, among salespeople with higher levels of neuroticism, similar feedback intensified the negative relationship between neuroticism and customer acquisition effectiveness. The study assessed effectiveness through respondents' self-reported evaluations. These findings suggest that managerial feedback may

influence sales performance differently depending on individual characteristics, highlighting the importance of examining how sales agents experience supervisory support during competency development.

Three publications examining female sales promotion personnel, commonly referred to in Indonesia as Sales Promotion Girls (SPGs), in Kendari provide qualitative evidence closely related to the context of sales agents. Marjani et al. (2025a) and Suriadi et al. (2025) reported that formal training strengthened participants' conceptual understanding of products and sales processes, whereas informal knowledge sharing among colleagues enhanced practical competencies. They also identified opportunities for workplace practice, teamwork, and rewards as factors influencing training transfer. Marjani et al. (2025b) further emphasized that the application of training outcomes did not occur automatically but required peer reinforcement, individual motivation, and alignment between training content and workplace demands. All three publications reported 25 participants and, based on the abstracts reviewed, examined similar organizational and geographical contexts involving the same company and city. Consequently, these publications should be interpreted as a related body of contextual evidence rather than automatically treated as three independent empirical investigations. This distinction is important to avoid overstating the strength and independence of the available evidence.

The synthesis of previous studies revealed a relatively consistent pattern in which peer support, supervisory assistance, opportunities for practical application, and organizational learning culture were associated with the transfer of acquired competencies to workplace practices. However, differences emerged regarding the role of managerial coaching and feedback, as their effects were not uniformly beneficial across individual salespeople (Peasley, 2022). Methodological limitations were also evident. Quantitative studies primarily examined statistical relationships among variables, whereas the available qualitative studies were concentrated in specific consumer retail settings. Consequently, the reviewed literature provided limited explanations of how sales agents in other organizational contexts perceived the effectiveness of upskilling programs designed to address changing market conditions and how they connected their learning experiences with sales behaviors and job performance. This research gap remained provisional because searches of the GARUDA and Scopus databases had not yet been completed. Therefore, the scope and validity of the identified gap required confirmation through a documented and comprehensive literature search. The anticipated contribution of the present study was primarily contextual, focusing on understanding the factors facilitating or constraining the application of newly acquired competencies among sales agents rather than proposing a new theoretical framework.

This study distinguished five interrelated dimensions commonly examined in training evaluation: program effectiveness, learning outcomes, training transfer, behavioral change, and sales performance outcomes. Learning outcomes encompassed the knowledge and competencies acquired by sales agents, whereas training transfer concerned the application of these competencies in actual workplace situations. Behavioral change was reflected in modifications to agents' approaches to customer interactions, while sales performance outcomes were also influenced by external and organizational factors, including pricing, product quality, market demand, competition, sales territories, and broader market conditions. Accordingly, participant satisfaction was not considered sufficient evidence of program effectiveness, and improvements in sales target achievement following training were not attributed exclusively to upskilling interventions. The preliminary analytical framework encompassed competency development needs, program design and implementation, learning experiences, training transfer, facilitating factors and barriers, behavioral changes, and relevant performance indicators. The framework also allowed additional themes to emerge inductively from the qualitative data.

Based on these considerations, the primary research question addressed how sales agents perceived and experienced the effectiveness of upskilling programs in supporting their job performance amid changing market conditions. The supporting research questions examined the relevance of training materials and instructional methods to sales requirements, the application of acquired competencies during customer interactions, and the factors facilitating or hindering training transfer. In the simulated research context, the supervisor's perspective was presented solely as an illustrative comparison and did not constitute actual interview evidence. Accordingly, the study aimed to describe the implementation of upskilling programs for sales agents, explore agents' experiences in acquiring and applying new competencies, and identify the facilitating factors and barriers influencing training transfer in response to market changes. The study did not seek to establish a causal relationship between upskilling participation and improved sales performance. Instead, perceived relationships between training experiences and job performance were interpreted as participants' perceptions and considered alongside any available supporting evidence.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the implementation of upskilling programs, sales agents' learning experiences, the application of acquired competencies, and factors influencing workplace performance. The approach was selected to facilitate a thematic examination of training experiences and skill transfer rather than test statistical relationships among variables. This methodological orientation was consistent with previous descriptive qualitative studies involving field sales personnel (Marjani et al., 2025b; Suriadi et al., 2025).

A hypothetical research scenario involving an Indonesian consumer goods distribution company was developed to illustrate the proposed methodology. The scenario featured a two-day training program, Upskilling Agent 2025, covering product knowledge, customer needs assessment, objection handling, and customer follow-up through presentations, role-playing exercises, and case discussions. Purposive sampling was proposed to include eight sales agents with at least six months of work experience and one supervisor. These participants represented an illustrative sampling framework rather than an actual research sample.

The proposed data collection period was January–February 2026 and included semi-structured interviews, observations of sales activities, and document analysis. The interview guide addressed competency development needs, training experiences, workplace application of acquired skills, supervisory and peer support, and barriers to training transfer. Interviews were expected to last approximately 30–45 minutes. However, these procedures and timelines represented a proposed research design rather than completed data collection activities.

The proposed research instruments included the researcher as the primary instrument, a semi-structured interview guide, and an observation checklist. The interview guide was intended to undergo a preliminary clarity assessment, while field notes were to be documented following observation activities. Because no primary research data or verified interview transcripts were available, these procedures were not presented as completed research activities, and no participant quotations were attributed to actual informants.

Table 1. Inventory of empirical evidence

Code	Role	Data types	Time	Topics	Status
A-01	Agents	Interview (simulation plan)	Jan–Feb 2026 (example)	Upskilling competency and experience requirements	Data not yet collected

Code	Role	Data types	Time	Topics	Status
A-02	Agents	Interview (simulation plan)	Jan–Feb 2026 (example)	Application of skills and barriers	Data not yet collected
S-01	Supervisor	Interview (simulation plan)	Jan–Feb 2026 (example)	Support, coaching, and evaluation	Data not yet collected
D-01	Program documents	Program materials (sample documents required)	Program year (not yet determined)	Training materials, methods, and objectives	Not yet available

The proposed data analysis employed a thematic approach involving transcription, repeated reading, coding, and the organization of codes into analytical categories. These categories were intended to be refined iteratively based on emerging patterns in the data. Comparisons across participants were planned to identify recurring themes, variations in experiences, and potentially contradictory perspectives without imposing predetermined interpretations. Procedures such as maintaining an audit trail, conducting researcher discussions, member checking, and triangulation were considered potential strategies for enhancing analytical rigor but were not presented as completed activities.

The trustworthiness of the proposed analysis was to be supported through systematic documentation of analytical decisions, transparent presentation of supporting evidence, and consideration of divergent findings. Interview excerpts were intended to be presented with sufficient contextual information to preserve participants' intended meanings while protecting their confidentiality. Any quotations that were translated or paraphrased would be clearly identified. Findings that contradicted dominant themes would also be examined and reported where supported by the data. Interpretations were to be grounded in multiple relevant observations or accounts whenever possible, and methodological limitations, including aspects that could not be adequately assessed, would be acknowledged in the discussion.

The proposed research procedures incorporated ethical considerations related to informed consent, participant confidentiality, organizational authorization, data protection, and institutional ethics approval where required. Participant identifiers, such as A-01 for sales agents and S-01 for supervisors, were proposed to protect individual identities. However, because the research scenario was hypothetical and did not involve actual participants, no informed consent, organizational authorization, or ethics approval was claimed to have been obtained. All applicable ethical requirements would need to be fulfilled before collecting or reporting primary research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented according to the focus of the discussion, and each section is discussed with the same structure, i.e. statement of findings, field evidence, meaning of findings, comparison with the literature, and implications for the research question. Comparisons with the literature are always separated from field findings so that readers can distinguish the origin of each statement. Table 2 summarizes previous research used as a comparison. The following discussion focuses on the initial categories that are retained, revised, or deleted based on the data, and the dimensions that cannot be assessed due to data limitations are openly stated in Table 3.

Table 2. Summary of previous research as a comparison

Source	Context and methods	Relevant findings
Marjani et al. (2025a)	Sales Promotion Girls, Kendari; qualitative descriptive, 25 participants	Formal learning supports understanding, informal learning supports practical skills; transfer is associated with field practice, peers, and rewards
Suriadi et al. (2025)	PT Unilever Kendari; qualitative descriptive, 25 out of 32 SPGs, interviews, observations, documents	Formal training adds conceptual understanding, peer-to-peer exchanges strengthen practical competence; limited uneven distribution of knowledge and limited recognition
Marjani et al. (2025b)	PT Unilever Kendari; qualitative descriptive, 25 participants (22 sales promoters, 1 supervisor, 1 coordinator, 1 beauty advisor)	Transfers are not automatic and require peer strengthening, motivation, and conformity to work demands
Gemmano et al. (2026)	111 female salespeople, cosmetics companies; surveys and SEM	Informal transfer activities mediate team support and team performance
Peasley (2022)	199 B2B salespeople in the United States; surveys, self-assessments	Feedback reinforces the influence of caution, but it doesn't help neurotic salespeople on customer acquisition
Kerr & Marcos-Cuevas (2024)	Meta-analysis of 150 studies (2009–2020)	19 determinants of sales performance, from universal to context-specific
Gemmano et al. (2022)	164 workers; online questionnaire, path analysis	Learning culture moderates transfer and performance relationships
Salamon et al. (2022)	311 working adults; soft skills training	Work resources are concerned with transfer through engagement, motivation, and opportunity
Bhat et al. (2022)	Conceptual studies	Learner characteristics, instructional design, and work environment as transfer factors
Arabi & Garza (2023)	Nurse training programs; training evaluation and design	Evaluation is used to improve design and change training practices
Gautam & Basnet (2021)	Higher education sector; quantitative	Motivation to transfer mediates organizational culture and transfer
Bhurtel & Bhattarai (2023)	Technical education instructor, Nepal	Internal and external environmental factors affect transfer

The discussion of the relationship between skills and performance follows three closely differentiated levels of evidence. The first level is the agent's reported understanding and skills after the program, which relates to learning outcomes. The second level is the application and behavior change in customer interactions, which are only expressed as findings when supported by interviews, observations, or documents. The third level is sales outcomes, which are only discussed when a valid performance report is available and is still treated as indication, not causal evidence. With this separation, the language used adjusts the strength of the data, for example it is perceived to support or relates to the reported change in behavior. This separation also helps the reader assess the extent to which conclusions can be transferred to other organizations. The findings at the first level are generally the most data-driven, while the third

level is most dependent on the availability of legitimate performance documents and permission to use them.

Suitability of Competency Needs and Upskilling Materials

This discussion examines the extent to which upskilling material is perceived to be relevant to the sales situation faced by agents. Bhat et al. (2022) place instructional design as one of the groups of factors that influence transfer, and Arabi and Garza (2023) show that evaluation can be used to improve training design. If field data shows agents assessing materials according to the needs of the customers they face, it is in line with the view that design suitability supports implementation. If agents assess the material too general, the findings can be read alongside Kerr and Marcos-Cuevas' (2024) argument that some performance determinants are contextual, so uniform materials are not necessarily suitable for all regions or types of customers. The literature serves to interpret the findings and does not replace field data.

Learning Methods and Understanding of Agents

This discussion discusses how agents learn through formal sessions and how they assess their understanding. Research on Sales Promotion Girls in Kendari reported that formal learning strengthens conceptual understanding of products and sales, while informal exchanges between peers strengthen practical competencies (Marjani et al., 2025a; Suriadi et al., 2025). If agents in this study describe similar patterns, the similarities are read carefully because the context of the organization and the products is different. The understanding of the material reported by the agents also does not automatically indicate that the material is applied consistently, so the focus of this discussion is differentiated from the focus of the implementation discussion in the next section. When the data shows that agents understand but do not apply, the difference becomes an important finding about the limits of program effectiveness.

Application of Skills and Adaptation to Customers

This discussion describes a concrete change in agent behavior in interactions with customers. These behaviors are only reported as findings when they appear in interviews, observations, or research documents. The range of sales activities described by Peasley (2022), from prospecting to negotiation, can be used as a map to place the behaviors found. Gemmano et al. (2022) use adaptivity as one of the performance dimensions, and this dimension is relevant for interpreting whether agents adjust their approach when customer needs change. The differences between agent-reported behavior and observed behavior, when available, are explicitly discussed.

Supervisor and Coaching Support

This discussion examines the role of supervisors in mentoring, feedback, and assessing agent behavior changes. Peasley (2022) found that quality feedback from managers reinforces the influence of caution on the effectiveness of lead finding and customer acquisition, while managerial imitation helps salespeople who tend to be neurotic. The same study showed that feedback is not beneficial to all salespeople, and that the measurement of its effectiveness is based on respondents' self-assessments. Therefore, if agents in this study describe different coaching experiences, these differences are not automatically considered anomalies. The explanation is only proposed when the data shows relevant factors, such as the length of service, the customer's character, or the way the supervisor delivers feedback.

Intergene Learning and the Work Environment

These discussions include intergen learning, peer support, and working conditions that allow skills to be put into practice. Gemmano et al. (2026) report that informal transfer activities mediate the relationship between team support and team performance in female salespeople in cosmetics companies. Marjani et al. (2025b) illustrate that transfers among sales promoters require the strengthening of peers and conformity to work demands. Salamon et al.

(2022) show that work resources and opportunities to transfer are related to the application of training outcomes, while Bhurtel and Bhattarai (2023) emphasize the role of environmental factors. If the field data show a similar pattern, the findings reinforce the reading that transfer is a social process in the workplace, but if agents work alone with little interaction, the difference is explained by their work structure.

Operational Barriers and Market Dynamics

This discussion discusses operational barriers that limit the application of skills and how agents cope with market changes. Salamon et al. (2022) report that job demands are related to lower transfers through engagement and opportunities to transfer. Research in Kendari reported that the effectiveness of knowledge sharing is limited by uneven distribution of knowledge and limited institutional recognition (Suriadi et al., 2025), as well as by emotional detachment and lack of organizational support (Marjani et al., 2025b). If agents in this study cite pressing targets, administrative burdens, or price and competition changes as inhibitors, it is separated from the weaknesses of the upskilling program itself. This separation is important because sales outcomes are influenced by many factors outside of training.

Agent Perception and Performance Evidence

This discussion distinguishes agents' perceptions of the benefits of upskilling from the available evidence of performance. Kerr and Marcos-Cuevas (2024) show that the way sales performance is measured affects the relationship between determinants and outcomes, so the selected indicators should be described and limited. When agents report that new skills help conversations with customers, they are written as experiences or perceptions, not as evidence of increased sales. Where valid and comparable performance reports are available, their use is described with limitations in interpretation, as targets achieved after training are not necessarily due to training. Gemmano et al. (2026) separate performance from the actual results of the team in their model, and similar separations are useful so that indirect behavioral changes are equated with sales outcomes.

Cross-Focus Comparison of Discussion

Cross-focus comparisons were conducted to see if the same factors appeared repeatedly in different parts of the data. The literature reviewed provided three possible patterns, namely program design factors, social support factors in the workplace, and work demand factors that limit practice opportunities (Bhat et al., 2022; Gemmano et al., 2026; Salamon et al., 2022). This study does not assume that all three emerge, and that other patterns born from the data are treated equally. If the patterns found differ from the literature, it is likely that contextual factors are discussed only to the extent supported by the data, without additional speculation. These comparisons form the basis of a synthesis that answers the research questions and shows the limits of conclusions that can be drawn.

Synthesis of Program Effectiveness

Table 3. Matrix of program effectiveness dimensions

Dimensions	Analytical questions	Sources of evidence	Status of evidence
Material suitability	Is the material suitable for the sales needs of the agent?	Previous literature; program materials if available	No field data yet
Quality of delivery	How are the methods and delivery assessed by agents?	Literature; actual interviews if conducted	No field data yet
Participant understanding	What does the agent understand after the program?	Actual interviews and/or learning evaluations	No field data yet

Dimensions	Analytical questions	Sources of evidence	Status of evidence
Practice opportunities	Are there opportunities to apply skills?	Actual observations and coaching notes	No field data yet
Skill application	What behavior changed in the field?	Observations, interviews, or actual documents	No field data yet
Supervisor support	How does mentoring and feedback work?	Supervisor interviews and/or coaching notes	No field data yet
Evaluation of results	How are implementation and performance evaluated?	Valid performance reports with a comparison period	Can't be assessed without performance data

Conceptually, the literature synthesis suggests that upskilling effectiveness needs to be examined as a series that includes material suitability, participant understanding, practical opportunities, social support, and skills transfer to work. Publications on salespeople highlight the role of formal and informal learning, while training transfer studies in other areas demonstrate the importance of opportunities to implement learning outcomes and work environment support. In this example, these dimensions are the framework of the analysis, not the outcomes that have been found in a particular organization. Positive evidence, constraints, and dimensions that have not yet been assessed can only be established after legitimate primary data has been analyzed.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature synthesis, upskilling programs may contribute to sales agents' job readiness when training content aligns with workplace requirements and is reinforced through opportunities for practical application, supervisory feedback, and peer learning. However, these conclusions were derived from existing literature rather than empirical findings from a specific organization, as authentic interview transcripts, field observations, and organizational performance records were not available. Consequently, the relationship between upskilling and job performance could only be interpreted as a potential association supported by previous research rather than a causal relationship established by the present study. Further empirical investigation is therefore necessary to validate these interpretations and develop conclusions grounded in primary research data.

The reviewed literature suggested several practical recommendations, including conducting training needs assessments, incorporating realistic customer interaction scenarios into training activities, providing opportunities for workplace application, and strengthening supervisory coaching and peer knowledge sharing. These recommendations represented preliminary implications derived from previous studies rather than interventions whose effectiveness had been empirically demonstrated in a specific organizational setting. Future research should identify and prioritize appropriate interventions based on the actual barriers and facilitating factors experienced by sales agents. The applicability of these recommendations across organizations should also be evaluated in relation to differences in product characteristics, customer needs, organizational structures, and market conditions.

The principal limitation of this study was its reliance on a literature-based hypothetical research scenario without actual participants, interview transcripts, observation records, or organizational performance data. Consequently, the manuscript did not provide empirical evidence sufficient to support conclusions about the effectiveness of upskilling programs in a particular organization. Subsequent research should collect primary data from sales agents and, where relevant, supervisors, while systematically documenting the training context, data

collection procedures, and analytical processes. Assessing the contribution of upskilling programs to sales performance would also require reliable organizational performance indicators and consideration of other factors influencing sales outcomes. Such investigations would strengthen the empirical foundation of the proposed framework and provide more context-specific evidence for developing effective competency enhancement strategies.

FUNDING

The author states that this research does not receive special funding support from government, private, or other organizations in the implementation of research and/or publication of this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author states that this research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationship that could cause potential conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

The author is responsible for all stages of the research, including the conceptualization of the research, the preparation of the methodology, the search and selection of the literature, the analysis of data, the interpretation of the results, the preparation of the manuscript, and the final revision of the article. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE STATEMENT

The author states that Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not used to produce research data, conduct scientific analysis, or replace the author's intellectual contribution in the preparation of this manuscript. When used in the manuscript preparation process, AI is only used to a limited extent to help improve the language and writing structure. The author remains fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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