

Modeling the Impact of Attachment Styles on Work Ethics with the Mediating Role of Job Adaptability

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to model the impact of attachment styles on work ethics among judicial employees, examining the mediating role of job adaptability in this relationship. This research employed a quantitative, correlational design using path analysis within the framework of structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of employees from the central headquarters of the Judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Judiciary Research Institute in Tehran. A total of 108 participants were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected through validated instruments, including the Hazan and Shaver Attachment Style Questionnaire, Petty's Work Ethics Questionnaire, and the Davis and Lofquist Job Adaptability Scale. Descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted using SPSS and LISREL software. The results indicated that secure attachment style had a significant positive direct effect on both job adaptability ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 4.50$) and work ethics ($\beta = 0.39$, $t = 5.27$). Moreover, job adaptability partially mediated the relationship between secure attachment and work ethics, with an indirect effect of 0.13 and a total effect of 0.52. In contrast, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles did not show significant effects on either job adaptability or work ethics. Model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.34$, GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.078) confirmed a good fit between the proposed conceptual model and the data. These findings suggest that secure attachment plays a critical role in promoting ethical behavior in professional contexts, both directly and through enhanced adaptability. Organizations aiming to foster ethical work environments should consider psychological factors such as attachment styles and invest in training programs that support adaptability and emotional regulation.

Keywords: Attachment styles, work ethics, job adaptability, structural equation modeling, judicial employees.

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Introduction

Work ethics, as a multidimensional construct encompassing commitment, responsibility, cooperation, and integrity, remains central to individual performance and institutional success. In organizational psychology and behavioral science, increasing attention has been paid to the internal and relational

mechanisms that shape ethical conduct in the workplace. Among these, individual psychological structures such as attachment styles have emerged as key predictors of moral orientation and ethical behavior at work (1, 2).

Attachment theory, first proposed by Bowlby, offers a framework for understanding how early relational experiences shape internal working models of self and others, which in turn influence adult interpersonal behavior, emotional regulation, and occupational functioning (3). Secure attachment has been repeatedly associated with empathy, self-regulation, and moral reasoning—attributes that align with ethical conduct in professional settings (2, 4). Conversely, insecure attachment styles, including avoidant and anxious-ambivalent, have been linked to moral disengagement, low commitment, and maladaptive coping strategies in occupational roles (5, 6).

The workplace provides a unique social context where attachment patterns are enacted and reinforced. Recent theoretical developments argue that attachment dynamics significantly influence moral identity and interpersonal relationships at work, thus shaping employees' ethical orientations (1, 4). For instance, secure individuals tend to internalize organizational values more effectively and are more capable of resolving ethical dilemmas cooperatively (7). This is supported by findings showing that secure attachment correlates positively with prosocial behavior, altruism, and job satisfaction (8, 9).

Job adaptability—the ability to adjust behavior, emotions, and cognition in response to changing work demands—has also emerged as a critical variable in predicting ethical behavior. It reflects a dynamic competence encompassing cognitive flexibility, resilience, and learning orientation, all of which facilitate ethical decision-making in complex and high-pressure work environments (10, 11). Adaptability functions as a psychological bridge between internal dispositions (such as attachment styles) and outward conduct (such as ethical behavior). Individuals with higher job adaptability are more likely to exhibit moral consistency, compliance with ethical standards, and constructive responses to workplace challenges (12).

Given these associations, the present study proposes that job adaptability may mediate the relationship between attachment styles and work ethics. This mediation is theoretically plausible because secure attachment is associated with greater emotional stability and cognitive control, which in turn enhance adaptive functioning. Conversely, insecure attachment may impede adaptability due to tendencies toward emotional dysregulation and avoidance, thereby weakening ethical decision-making capacity (5, 13). Therefore, the pathway from attachment to ethics may be indirect in many cases, operating through the individual's adaptive capacities.

The relevance of this conceptual model is particularly salient in public sector settings such as the judiciary, where ethical conduct is foundational to institutional legitimacy and societal trust. Employees in these environments face complex ethical scenarios that require both internal moral conviction and external adaptability. Leadership style and organizational climate also play a role in reinforcing ethical behavior, but individual psychological structures remain a critical foundation (14-16). Studies have shown that work ethics are enhanced when employees experience psychological security, moral engagement, and supportive interpersonal relationships—all of which are more likely in individuals with secure attachment styles (17, 18).

In developing the proposed model, this research is guided by empirical findings that link secure attachment to empathy development and moral reasoning, which are essential components of work ethics

(2). It also builds on studies emphasizing the role of job adaptability in promoting performance, resilience, and ethical alignment in public service roles (10, 11). Importantly, the study integrates these variables into a path analysis framework, allowing for the estimation of direct and indirect effects of different attachment styles on work ethics via job adaptability.

To date, limited research has examined the combined effects of attachment and adaptability on workplace ethics, especially within the cultural and organizational context of the Iranian judiciary. This gap underscores the need for context-specific studies that consider both personal and systemic factors. By focusing on judicial staff, the present study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how internal relational schemas shape ethical performance in high-stakes institutional settings (7, 9).

Furthermore, understanding these psychological dynamics has practical implications for human resource development, employee training, and organizational ethics programs. Interventions that enhance secure attachment characteristics (such as empathy, trust, and emotional regulation) and job adaptability skills (such as resilience and learning agility) may contribute to a more ethical workforce. Such insights align with broader initiatives in ethical leadership, professional integrity, and institutional accountability in the public sector (8, 17).

The present study seeks to model the impact of attachment styles on work ethics through the mediating role of job adaptability, with a focus on employees in Iran's judicial sector.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted using a correlational survey design, specifically employing path analysis within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework to test the proposed hypotheses. The statistical population included all employees of the Judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran. From this population, a total of 108 participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. These participants were staff members from the central headquarters of the Tehran Judiciary and the Research Institute of the Judiciary. The sample size was deemed sufficient for the scope of the study, given the exploratory nature of the research and the analytical technique employed.

Data Collection

To assess work ethics, the study employed Petty's Work Ethics Questionnaire developed by Gregory C. Petty in 1990. This questionnaire conceptualizes work ethics across four key dimensions: interest and attachment to work (6 items), perseverance and diligence (6 items), healthy and human relationships at the workplace (6 items), and collective spirit and cooperation (5 items). Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Always true for me" to "Never true for me." The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha reported at 0.76 in the current study. Previous studies, such as that by Kopashi (2018), reported even higher reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$) based on a pilot test involving 20 school administrators.

Attachment styles were assessed using the Hazan and Shaver Attachment Style Questionnaire, originally developed in 1987. This tool was standardized in Iran by Rahimian Boogar et al. (2004) in a sample of public hospital nurses in Isfahan. It consists of 15 items designed to measure three distinct attachment styles—

secure, avoidant, and ambivalent—using five items per style. Participants respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). Scores can range from 15 to 75 overall, with a midpoint of 45, and from 5 to 25 within each subscale. A score above the midpoint indicates a higher tendency toward that attachment style. The original developers reported a test-retest reliability of 0.78. In Iranian samples, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.75 to 0.86 depending on gender and subscale, with consistently strong internal consistency reported by Basharat (2005), Mozaeni, Aghaei, and Golparvar (2014), and others.

Job adaptability was measured using the Davis and Lofquist Work Adjustment Questionnaire, which was adapted and validated in Iran by Shahrebi Farahani (2010). The questionnaire is based on Davis and Lofquist's (1991) theory of work adjustment and contains 36 items across seven dimensions: achievement values, comfort values, status values, altruism values, safety values, autonomy values, and work style. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The initial version of the questionnaire included 44 items, but 8 were removed due to factor loadings below 0.40. The final 36-item version achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. The reliability of subscales was also satisfactory, with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 (autonomy) to 0.90 (altruism), indicating strong internal consistency for each domain.

Data analysis

To analyze the collected data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. Descriptive statistics included measures such as mean, median, and mode, along with relevant tables and graphical representations to summarize the data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to determine the normality of the data distribution. Depending on the results of this test, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used for normally distributed variables, and Spearman's rank-order correlation was applied for non-normal distributions. To examine multiple correlations and construct the statistical model, path analysis was performed. Data were analyzed using SPSS and LISREL software packages, which allowed for accurate modeling and hypothesis testing. The ultimate goal of the analysis was to generate a predictive statistical model of professional ethics based on attachment styles and job adaptability.

Findings and Results

A total of 108 individuals participated in this study, of whom 58% were male and 42% female, indicating a gender distribution skewed toward men. The highest frequency was observed in the 35–45 age group (62%), while the lowest belonged to those under 35 years of age (19%). The participants' age ranged from 24 to 55 years, with a mean age of 41. More than three-quarters of the participants were married, while less than one-quarter were single. Regarding educational background, 54% held a Master's degree, 37% had a Bachelor's degree, 8% a Ph.D., and 1% an Associate degree. In terms of work experience, the highest frequency was among those with 5 to 10 years of experience (54%), and the lowest was among those with less than 5 years (15%). Work experience ranged from 1 to 25 years, with an average of approximately 10 years. The majority of respondents held expert-level positions within their organizations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Attachment Styles, Work Ethics, and Job Adaptability Dimensions

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Avoidant Attachment	13.32	3.90	5	25
Secure Attachment	15.09	3.41	5	25
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	13.36	5.01	5	25
Interest and Attachment to Work	3.75	0.91	1	5
Healthy and Human Relationships at Work	4.24	0.77	1	5
Perseverance and Diligence in Work	4.32	0.70	1	5
Team Spirit and Participation at Work	4.31	0.74	1	5
Achievement Value	3.24	0.80	1	5
Comfort Value	2.93	0.48	1	5
Status Value	2.99	0.87	1	5
Altruism Value	3.30	0.72	1	5
Security Value	3.01	0.47	1	5
Autonomy Value	2.94	0.81	1	5
Adaptability Style	2.86	0.77	1	5

The descriptive statistics indicate that among the attachment styles, secure attachment had the highest average score ($M = 15.09$, $SD = 3.41$), followed by anxious-ambivalent ($M = 13.36$, $SD = 5.01$) and avoidant ($M = 13.32$, $SD = 3.90$). In terms of work ethics, the dimension of perseverance and diligence ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.70$) and team spirit and participation ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.74$) showed the highest mean scores, reflecting strong engagement in collaborative and persistent work behavior. The dimension with the lowest mean among work ethics was interest and attachment to work ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.91$). Regarding job adaptability, altruism ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.72$) and achievement value ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.80$) had the highest averages, while adaptability style ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.77$) and comfort value ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.48$) had relatively lower means, indicating moderate adaptability among respondents. Overall, the results suggest moderate-to-high levels of work ethics and varying degrees of attachment styles and adaptability dimensions among judicial staff.

Table 2. Results of the Structural Equation Model (Standardized Estimates)

No.	Independent Latent Variable	Dependent Latent Variable	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value
1	Avoidant Attachment Style	Job Adaptability	-0.10	-1.70
2	Avoidant Attachment Style	Work Ethics	-0.12	-1.80
3	Secure Attachment Style	Job Adaptability	0.33	4.50
4	Secure Attachment Style	Work Ethics	0.39	5.27
5	Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	Job Adaptability	-0.15	-1.95
6	Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	Work Ethics	-0.11	-1.76

The results of the structural equation modeling (SEM) indicate that among the three types of attachment styles, only secure attachment style has a statistically significant effect on both job adaptability ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 4.50$) and work ethics ($\beta = 0.39$, $t = 5.27$), as their t -values exceed the critical threshold of 1.96. Neither avoidant nor anxious-ambivalent attachment styles showed statistically significant relationships with either of the dependent variables, as all associated t -values remained below the significance threshold. These findings suggest that secure attachment style positively contributes to both job adaptability and ethical workplace behavior, and that job adaptability may function as a mediator in this relationship.

Table 3. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Secure Attachment on Work Ethics

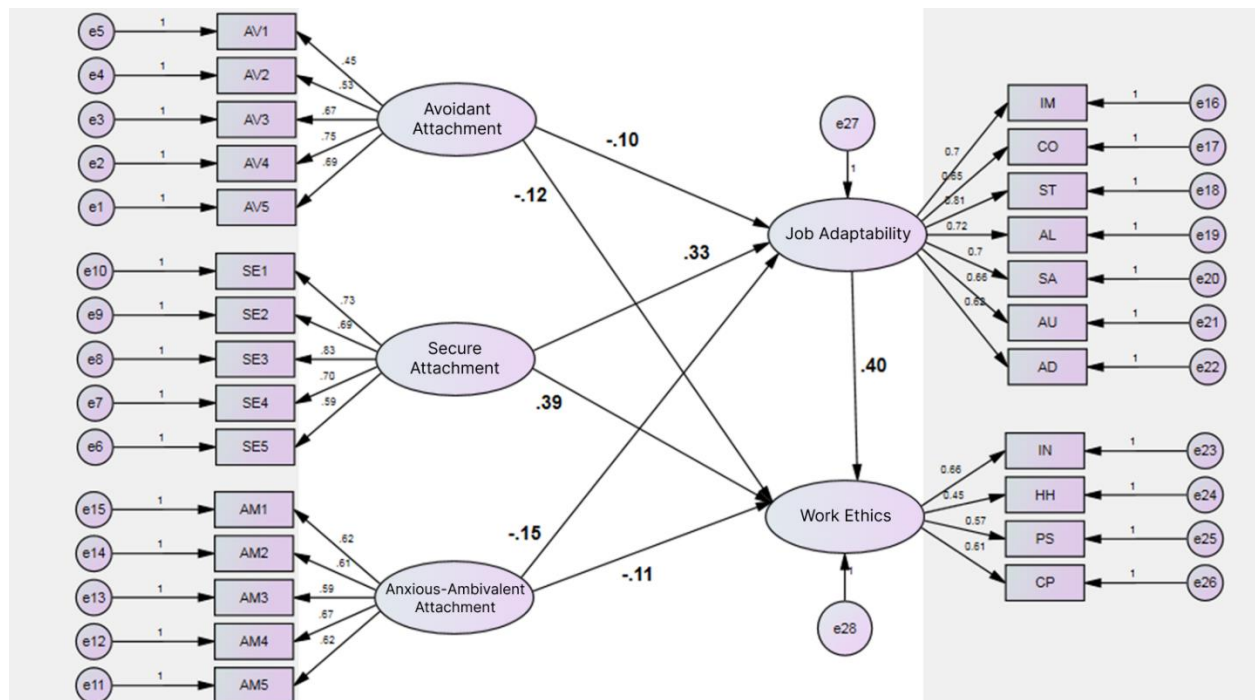
Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Secure Attachment Style	Work Ethics	0.39	0.13 (0.40×0.33)	0.52

As shown in Table 3, the total standardized effect of secure attachment style on work ethics is 0.52, composed of both a direct effect ($\beta = 0.39$) and an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.13$) mediated through job adaptability. This finding reinforces the central role of secure attachment in enhancing employees' ethical conduct, both directly and by fostering better adaptation to workplace demands. Employees with secure attachment tendencies are more likely to align with ethical work standards, partly because they demonstrate greater psychological and behavioral adaptability on the job.

Table 4. Model Fit Indices for Structural Equation Modeling

No.	Fit Index	Abbreviation	Value	Acceptable Threshold	Interpretation
1	Chi-square / degrees of freedom	χ^2/df	2.34	< 3	Acceptable
2	Goodness-of-Fit Index	GFI	0.95	> 0.90	Good
3	Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index	AGFI	0.91	> 0.90	Good
4	Normed Fit Index	NFI	0.96	> 0.90	Good
5	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	0.92	> 0.90	Good
6	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	0.078	< 0.08	Acceptable

The structural model demonstrates a strong fit to the data based on commonly accepted SEM fit indices. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was 2.34, well within the acceptable range below 3. The RMSEA value was 0.078, satisfying the threshold of less than 0.08. Additionally, all other fit indices (GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.91, NFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.92) exceeded the recommended cutoff value of 0.90, confirming the robustness of the model. These results validate the conceptual model and support the hypothesized structural relationships between attachment styles, job adaptability, and work ethics.

**Figure 1. Final Model of the Study**

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the structural relationship between attachment styles and work ethics with the mediating role of job adaptability among employees of the Iranian judiciary. The findings supported a significant direct and indirect effect of secure attachment on work ethics, while avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles did not demonstrate significant paths to either job adaptability or ethical behavior. These results highlight the unique influence of secure relational patterns on both adaptive functioning and moral engagement in the workplace.

The path analysis revealed that secure attachment style significantly predicted higher levels of job adaptability and stronger work ethics. This finding is consistent with theoretical arguments that individuals with secure attachment are more likely to internalize prosocial values and demonstrate moral identity in work-related contexts (1, 2). The ability of securely attached individuals to form trusting relationships, regulate emotions, and respond to situational demands contributes to their ethical consistency and professional responsibility. This aligns with the findings of Ren et al. (2024), who argue that self-regulation processes—rooted in secure attachment—serve as a foundation for ethical decision-making in professional environments (4).

Furthermore, the mediation analysis indicated that job adaptability partially mediates the relationship between secure attachment and work ethics. This supports a growing body of research suggesting that adaptability functions as a conduit through which internal psychological traits influence external behavior in organizational settings. Dong et al. (2024) emphasized that individuals who exhibit adaptive capacity in response to daily work stressors are more engaged and demonstrate a higher degree of ethical behavior the following day (12). In this study, employees with secure attachment tendencies demonstrated greater adaptability, which in turn translated into more consistent work ethics, suggesting that adaptability not only buffers stress but also reinforces moral action.

On the contrary, neither avoidant nor anxious-ambivalent attachment styles showed a significant direct or indirect impact on job adaptability or work ethics. These findings align with previous studies indicating that insecure attachment often impairs interpersonal trust, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning (5, 6). Individuals with avoidant attachment are likely to distance themselves emotionally and suppress relational cues, making them less responsive to ethical obligations that require empathy or social responsibility (19). Similarly, those with anxious-ambivalent attachment may become overwhelmed by interpersonal anxiety and approval-seeking behaviors, which interfere with consistent ethical judgment and adaptability in high-pressure work environments (13, 20).

These results reinforce the idea that secure attachment fosters the development of a strong moral compass and ethical engagement by enabling greater psychological flexibility and adaptive self-regulation. Job adaptability, in this context, emerges not merely as a skill but as a behavioral manifestation of psychological maturity linked to secure attachment. This aligns with the view of Matabologa and Flotman (2024), who argue that ethical behavior in organizational settings is not solely a product of external enforcement but also of intrinsic psychological capacities such as adaptability and emotional regulation (10).

In the context of the Iranian judiciary, where ethical behavior is both a legal and moral imperative, the findings of this study are particularly significant. Securely attached employees appear better equipped to navigate complex ethical situations that require emotional stability, cognitive flexibility, and interpersonal

integrity. This supports the broader assertion that professional ethics are reinforced by internal psychological resources rather than only organizational policies (9, 14). Moreover, work ethics in such institutional settings are not limited to rule-following but extend to proactive engagement, teamwork, and altruistic service—domains in which securely attached and adaptive individuals particularly excel (7, 18).

Additionally, these findings are consistent with studies from educational, healthcare, and civil service sectors, which have similarly found that secure attachment and adaptability contribute positively to ethical performance and job satisfaction (8, 17). Khan et al. (2025) found that adolescents with secure attachment styles were more capable of making moral decisions due to their advanced empathy development and self-regulatory capacities (2). When extrapolated to adult professionals, this suggests that foundational attachment patterns continue to influence ethical behavior through adaptive emotional and cognitive mechanisms.

Interestingly, this study also complements the emerging scholarship advocating for more integrative models of professional ethics that include both structural (organizational) and psychological (individual) factors. While institutional codes of ethics provide the external framework, internal traits like attachment security and adaptability determine the extent to which individuals internalize and enact these standards. This dual-level approach has been emphasized in contemporary ethical theory and supported empirically by researchers such as Thanh et al. (2024), who promote ethical education grounded in both social norms and personal character development (11).

This multidimensional view of ethics also aligns with the theoretical work of Ren et al. (2024), who propose a model where attachment security enables self-regulation, which in turn supports ethical decision-making (4). In this study, job adaptability plays a mediating role that operationalizes the self-regulatory function, showing that personal adjustment skills are the behavioral channel through which attachment influences work ethics.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that ethical training and HR interventions in public institutions should not only focus on rule enforcement and compliance mechanisms but also on psychological development, emotional intelligence, and adaptability enhancement. Organizations may benefit from incorporating attachment-based assessments and training modules into their personnel development programs. For instance, leadership and mentoring strategies that cultivate secure attachments and model adaptive behaviors can significantly influence the ethical climate of the workplace (15, 16).

Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies in bridging the psychological literature on attachment with the applied organizational research on ethics and adaptability. By doing so, it not only validates existing theoretical models but also extends them within the context of judicial and legal work, a field where ethics is paramount and psychological pressures are intense. The findings underscore the importance of considering both dispositional and situational variables in understanding and promoting ethical behavior.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to employees of the judiciary in Tehran, which may affect the generalizability of the results to other sectors or geographic regions. The use of convenience sampling further limits external validity. Second, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not accurately reflect actual ethical behavior. Third, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to make causal inferences about the relationships among attachment styles, job adaptability, and work ethics.

Future research should consider using longitudinal designs to track changes in attachment-related behavior and ethical performance over time. It would also be beneficial to replicate this model in different institutional settings, such as healthcare, education, or corporate environments, to assess the consistency of the findings across contexts. Including additional mediating or moderating variables—such as organizational culture, leadership style, or emotional intelligence—could also deepen understanding of the mechanisms at play. Experimental or mixed-method approaches could complement the quantitative data with qualitative insights into how individuals experience ethical dilemmas and adapt their behavior.

Organizations, particularly in the public sector, should incorporate psychological assessments into their employee development programs to identify attachment-related tendencies that may influence ethical performance. Training modules focused on enhancing adaptability skills, such as emotional regulation, stress management, and interpersonal communication, may help foster a more ethically engaged workforce. Finally, ethical leadership models that emphasize supportive, trust-based relationships can reinforce the psychological conditions necessary for secure attachment and adaptability to thrive in the workplace.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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