

Perceptions and Attitudes of the Local Community towards Urban Refugees Living in Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda: A Cross-Sectional Study.

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Abstract



Background:

There is an increasing number of refugees choosing to live in urban centers even when this makes them forego humanitarian assistance such as shelter and food from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and host governments. Refugees in urban centers have to fend for themselves. This situation sometimes makes them 'lock horns' with the local communities. We examined the perception of the local community towards urban refugees in Mbarara city southwestern Uganda.

Methods:

We conducted 6 Focus Group Discussions composed of local leaders of the villages where refugees live. We also conducted 4 Key Informants Interviews with the Refugee Desk Officer (Office of The Prime Minister), the Officer in Charge of Mbarara Police Station, the Mayor Mbarara city, and the Resident City Commissioner. All participants were purposively selected due to their knowledge about the study topic. They were interviewed about their perceptions towards refugees in Mbarara city. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed.

Results:

Three themes emerged from the data: 1) Economic perceptions (employment competition, competition for land, basic needs scarcity, skilled labor, and economic favoritism) 2) Political perceptions (corruption, involvement in local politics, and security threat) 3) Sociocultural perceptions (religiosity, cultural acculturation, social inclusion, stigma, and sexual immorality) of society towards urban refugees.

Conclusions:

The community views refugees as people who are given preferential treatment by the government, civil society organizations, and the international community.

Recommendations :^a

Integration interventions be designed to ensure peaceful and cordial coexistence between the host community and refugees for sustainable development.

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1 Background:

Forced migration is an increasing global challenge that should be considered as a humanitarian and economic priority. During the past 25 years, the global population of forcibly displaced people nearly tripled from 33.9 million in 1997 to 82.4 million in 2020 (UNHCR, 2021a) and the low-income countries are shouldering an increasing burden of hosting refugees (Economic Policy Research Center, 2018). Uganda is ranked among the top five refugee-hosting countries globally and by the end of July 2021, Uganda was home to 1,499,5624 refugees (UNHCR, 2021b). The high number of refugees in Uganda is partly explained by the country's traditional hospitality and its progressive refugee policy (Reliefweb, 2020). The Ugandan refugee model allows for freedom of movement of refugees and thus, some have chosen to reside in urban areas rather than settlements, while others commute between settlements and urban areas (Walnycki *et al.*, 2019).

By July 2020 80,391 registered urban refugees were living in mainly Kampala, of which 34% are from Somalia, 31% are from DRC, 17% were from Eritrea, 6% from Burundi, and 12% from other nations (UNCHR & OPM, 2020). However, there are thousands of self-settled urban refugees in the cities of Uganda (Kampala, Arua, Gulu, Hoima, Mbale, Jinja, and Mbarara) (Irene, 2020). Many "self-settled" urban refugees in Uganda do not have the necessary identity documents to guarantee their protection and employment (Economic Policy Research Center, 2018; Höök, 2015; International Rescue Committee, 2018b). Many times refugees experience discrimination from the local community, exploitation, poverty, and difficulty in attaining sustainable livelihoods (Baranik *et al.*, 2018). Refugees in urban areas also face stigma, prejudices, and stereotypes that come with different cultural practices, which often lead to conflicts between refugees and urban host communities (The Humanitarian Platform for Local and National Organizations in Uganda, 2021).

Mbarara city, the main urban center in southwestern Uganda has many socio-economic opportunities that have attracted several refugees from the neighboring Nakivale and Oruchinga refugee settlements in Isingiro district (UNHCR, 2019a). Most refugees have skills but their employment chances and potentials may be limited by biases

or cultural or language barriers (International Rescue Committee, 2018b; Refugee Law Project, 2016). No published study has been conducted to assess the perceptions of the local communities towards the urban refugees. In this study, we explored the perceptions of the urban host community towards refugees living in Mbarara city in southwestern Uganda.

2 Methods

Study design

We conducted a cross-sectional qualitative study using a phenomenological approach to explore the perceptions and attitudes of the local community towards urban refugees living in Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda using an interview guide. Two similarly-worded interview guides were used, with one designated for Key Informants (KIs) and the other for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The interview guides had items that sought for participants' knowledge and awareness of urban refugees living in Mbarara, the social, economic, and political opinions held by the host community towards refugees. The interview guide used for the FGDs was translated into Runyankole-Rukiga, the local language of the region. The Key Informants Interview (KII) guide was written in English because all our key informants were government officers and so English was used since it is the official language of Uganda.

Study settings

The study was conducted in Mbarara city, in southwestern Uganda. The city was chosen for the study partly because it is a pathway for most refugees fleeing violence in the DRC, Burundi. The city also neighbors the Isingiro district where most refugees are resettled in either Nakivale or Oruchinga refugee settlements. The opening up of the DRC-Rwanda border has also tripled Mbarara city's logistical importance and for now, the city is the facet to Kigali, Bujumbura, Tanzania, and several towns in the eastern Congo (UBOS, 2020). Given the city's strategic location, many refugees from the rural neighboring settlements of Nakivale, Oruchinga, and Rwamwanja refugee settlements choose to leave their settlements in search of better living conditions in urban areas and end up staying in Mbarara city. Refugees in Mbarara city live alongside the locals, and both locals and refugees compete for survival in the city. Recruitment of par-

ticipants and the actual data collection were done between November 2019 and February 2020.

Study participants

The FGDs study participants were Local Council One (LC1) members of the villages where urban refugees live. These included LC1 Chairpersons, Vice chairpersons, and Secretaries, Chairpersons of village women's council, and any other members of the LC1 committees. The Key Informants (KIs) of the study included the Refugee Desk Officer of Mbarara Region (Office of The Prime Minister), the Officer in Charge of Mbarara Police Station, the Mayor Mbarara city, and the Resident City Commissioner. Participants were selected purposively because of their vast knowledge about the demographic characteristics of the people that live in Mbarara city, secondly, because they are charged with a responsibility of ensuring law and order in the city, and thirdly these, largely hold the opinions of the local community concerning a matter of interest and in this case; the local community's perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees. To ensure comprehension and full awareness of the content, we collected written informed consent from the participants. Ethical approval for the study was given by the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (# 02/12 - 18). Consistent with national guidelines, we registered the study with the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (# SS4922) and the Research Secretariat in the President's Office.

Data collection

Data were collected until a saturation point was achieved. This was a point where no more new information was being generated from the FGDs or the KIs. We conducted 6 FGDs with the Local Council One (LC1) committee members within the city's business center and its periphery. Each FGD was composed of 8 participants, we considered this size of the FGDs to be small enough to moderate, listen to and capture all the opinions of the participants yet the size of the group was large enough to take into consideration the diversity of opinions and views of participants as suggested by Morgan et al., (Morgan, L, 2011). We also conducted 4 key informants (KIs) interviews with the refugee desk officer of the Mbarara region - office of the prime minister, the officer in charge of Mbarara police station, the mayor of Mbarara city, and the residential city commissioner.

Data was collected using FGD and KII guides. The guides were comprised of open-ended questions about the perceptions of the local community towards urban refugees living in Mbarara City. The instruments were subjected to the scrutiny of the research team. Before the actual data collection was done, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The consent form presented to the participants explained the purpose of the study and clarified that participation would be entirely voluntary. The participants were assured that the interview would be confidential and that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences. On average each FGD took about one and a half hours while each KII took about 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. At the end of the interview, participants were offered a small token of ten thousand shillings (Shs10, 000/=) as compensation for their time offered during the interview.

To minimize bias in the study, the LC 1 members that took part in the study, were selected from different city geographical locations bearing in mind the social-economic status of the people living in a particular cell, for instance, we selected participants from the cells that were considered to be largely occupied by people from the "lower class", "middle class" and the "upper class". We also had a spectrum of key informants who largely gave independent and expert information concerning refugees living in the city. Moreover, all the authors reviewed the transcripts and reviewed the manuscript back and forth before it was submitted for publication.

Data management and analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim by research assistants and compared with the audio recordings to verify the fidelity of the transcription. The transcripts in Runyankole-Rukiga were then translated into English by an independent translator. Any discrepancies in the translation were discussed and amended accordingly. All the authors (BR, HEA, GZR, and AS) independently read through the transcripts. The initial coding was done by a single author (BR), and then the codes were discussed with the other co-authors for consensus based on the themes that emerged from the data. We adopted a thematic analysis for this study because it allows the researchers to fully reveal the meanings emerging from the data while conceptualizing narrative

reports as per significant units (Morgan, L, 2011). Three themes emerged out of the data that is to say economic, civil, and sociocultural perceptions and attitudes of local community towards refugees overlapped between the FGD and KII's participants. We selected quotations from both FGDs and KIIs in support of our results.

3 Results:

We conducted 6 FGDs each with 8 participants mixed both male and female from Mbarara city and 4 KIIs as illustrated in table 1

Three broad themes were generated from the data, the first theme was economic perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees evidenced in terms of; employment competition, competition for land, scarcity of basic needs, skilled labor, and economic favoritism. The second theme was political perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees evidence in terms of; sub-themes of corruption, involvement in local politics, and security threat. The third theme was socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees evidenced in terms of religiosity, cultural acculturation, social inclusion, stigma and discrimination, and sexual immorality.

Local community economic perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees

Employment competition, we found that refugee engagement in petty business and unskilled labor is interpreted as competition for employment from the locals. On this view, one of the participants had this to say;

"Due to vulnerable conditions they live in, they offer cheap labor but mainly unskilled and this has made it difficult for the locals to be employed since they demand high payments... apparently people prefer employing refugees at the expense of the locals. Also, they are engaged in hawking and they move from house to house, this has also affected business around especially African fabrics..." (Focus Group Discussion 3, Respondent 2).

Competition for land results also indicates that the refugees didn't only bring competition for market and employment but also competition for land. With Uganda's open refugee policy which allows refugees to settle and acquire property in any part of the country, many participants intimated that refugees were acquiring land in Uganda at a high

rate. For instance, in one of the FGDs a participant was quoted;

"... these refugees are threatening our livelihood because they have increased the prices for land and they buying at a faster rate. We doubt whether our children will have anything to buy in the future. Nationals have been out-competed and they have nothing left to buy..." (Focus Group Discussion 1, Participant 1).

Scarcity of basic needs, contrary to the already mentioned vulnerability, participants reported that refugees led to a scarcity of basic needs and increase in prices of basic needs although this led towards business development in the area. For instance, results show that refugees led to the rising in the prices of necessities like shelter and food items as one participant was quoted verbatim saying;

"Aaaaahh! yaaa... they have made house costs increase such as rent and for refugees don't bargain because most of them have money, they can pay for six months to one year and in dollars such as Somalis, Congolese, South Sudanese Hahaha... when you tell them that the house is for 100,000 shs, they pay because they have no option which is of positive impact to the community. Although it's of negative impact to the other poor community members they have benefited the communities of their stay like development, most of them support food markets, bars because they like taking beers hahaha.....!!!" (Focus Group Discussion 5, Participant 3).

Skilled labor, results revealed that many refugees have better competencies in vocational skills resulting in stiff competition with the locals in terms of apprenticeship skills and performing arts. Many participants agreed that many of these urban refugees had excellent skills in cosmetology, tailoring, carpentry, metalwork, mechanics, building among others. On this issue, one of the participants emphasized that:

"... they have different skills such as, there are those that know carpentry, building, hairdressing, electricity wiring, welding, and Moto vehicle mechanics... and some of them are good at singing in church choirs and events. Others have skills in teaching Kiswahili or French, so they have a lot of skills." (Focus Group Discussion 2, Participant 6).

Economic favoritism results indicated that refugees are favored by the government of Uganda and the UNHCR as well as other Non-Governmental Organizations. Participants alleged that refugees

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristic	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	29	56
	Female	23	44
Cell	Kyapotani	8	17
	Kitebero	8	17
	Andrews	8	17
	Kisenyi	8	17
	Nyamityobora	8	17
	Katete Central	8	17
Education	Primary	14	30
	Secondary	22	42
	Tertiary	16	31

receive monthly payments in foreign currency moreover and the local community was left languishing in poverty. For instance, in one of the FGDs, a member commented that;

“I don’t like refugees, they have made us poppers in our own country, government and NGOs give them money monthly, some of them stay in posh houses when for us we are just struggling for survival” (Focus Group Discussion 2, Participant 8).

Local community political perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees

Corruption, our findings revealed that refugees scammed their way into becoming citizens of Uganda through corruption and bribing the local politicians. For instance, in one of the FGDs a participant was quoted verbatim emphasizing that;

“They fail our policies, they bribe and connive with the politicians and they encourage corruption. For instance, others were issued with National IDs and passports through bribing politicians and they are now nationals. They have also used the same mechanisms to buy property here and stay illegally. . .” (Focus Group Discussion 4, Participant 5).

Involvement in local politics, participants’ respondents opined that refugees influenced the politics of the communities where they stay, through voting for people who give them small tokens but also those politicians who are believed to shield their interests. This was because some of the refugees were thought to have been registered as citizens of Uganda and that they even had national identity cards.

Indeed, one of the FGD participants was quoted in the following verbatim:

“Well! Well...there is a likelihood that refugees can contest and also vote because they registered for national IDs and they are now citizens. Hahaha...!! Because they are legally Ugandans already.” (Focus Group Discussion 3, Participant 8).

However, some of the participants believed that refugees in their communities play a passive role in the politics of their areas. This view was held by all the key informants. In fact, one of the key informants emphasized that;

“Refugees do not take part in the politics of Uganda. This is because they are not registered voters and there is no way they can have a say in the local politics of this country.” (Key informant 1).

Security threats, participants viewed refugees as security threats, participants intimated that refugees compromised security in their communities. Data showed that refugees were involved in petty thefts for survival but also some were perceived to be involved in gruesome criminology that further put the security of the community at stake. For instance, in one of the FGDs, a participant argued that;

“Some of them cause insecurity because some refugees come with guns from their countries. Some could be the masterminds of high-level robberies whereas others involved in simple burglary such as housebreakings and we sort these issues at community level. . .” (Focus Group Discussion 2, Participant 4).

Still, about insecurity, one of the key informants of the study, argued that some refugees have military backgrounds and need to be handled with care and also be rehabilitated otherwise they can cause harm to the society but also back in their home countries as expressed verbatim in this quote

"Some refugees who are from non-stable countries end up supporting rebel groups in the country. Others engage in high-profile murders and assassinations because some of them come when they are already high-profile criminals from their home countries but the government is in control over everything. It is, therefore, less likely that refugees can cause any major security concern apart from involving themselves in petty criminality for their survival here and there..." (Key informant 4).

Local community socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees

Religiosity, findings revealed that the local community viewed refugees to be religious and this was evidenced through establishing of their (refugees) own churches especially Pentecostal ones though a few of them attended the mainstream churches of Anglicans and Catholics. However, there was a common agreement that Muslim refugees attended local mosques for all their prayers. On this view, a participant emphasized;

"Refugees respect the cultures of the local community and get involved in the religious services and activities together with the locals especially muslims although some have their religious services that fit their languages especially born again churches." (Focus Group Discussion 3, Participant 5).

Acculturation

Cultural acculturation, participants also reported the occurrence of intermarriages between the local community and refugees. This view was emphasized by one of the participants in the following verbatim;

"Refugees especially the youths and the young have adopted the local cultural and social values and religion. They attend with the local community the same services and Juma prayers for the Moslem brothers and sisters. Others have been married here and the society gets along with them without any problem" (Key informant 2).

Social inclusion, findings revealed that community members viewed refugees as people who deserved to be supported emotionally and this was evidenced through the community's reception and

hospitality towards refugees. This was emphasized in one of the FGDs where a participant argued that;

"Socially, we have always received and welcomed them, employed them, communicated and socialized both in bars and other socializing places without discrimination, worked together by integrating as we are Africans in order to promote them. (Focus Group Discussion 3, Participant 6).

This very view was re-echoed by one of the key informants who argued that the local community didn't treat refugees as inferior people. For example, the community shared the same social services with refugees without any kind of discrimination as evidenced in this verbatim;

". . . .by allowing refugees use services and share with the services provided by the government of Uganda like hospitals, schools, electricity, giving them land and even sometimes jobs" (Key Informant 1).

Stigma and discrimination, on the contrary, some participants thought that the community treated refugees as social misfits and subjected them to several belittling labels, insults, and prejudice. It is not surprising that in one of the FGDs one of the participants commented that;

"Sometimes community members treat them unfairly by gossiping about them that they are refugees, terrorists, yet it stigmatizes them to be called such names they don't want to be discriminated like Congolese, Somalis or Rwandese but rather want to be unified with the community members they find." (Focus Group Discussion 2, Participant 6)

Sexual immorality, findings revealed that some community members viewed refugees as sexually immoral people who engaged in commercial sex for survival but also as people who were on a mission to spread disease to the local communities. On this issue, the following explanation was raised;

". . . immorality has increased because refugee ladies are very beautiful and are engaged in sexual promiscuity around bars in the town. Most men have left their wives and they are now hanging around for commercial sex with these ladies. . . . moreover the fact that they come from countries with shaky public health systems . . . we have challenges containing disease outbreaks such as Ebola. And when these come to these urban communities, they engage in commercial sexual activities which have a link with the spread of HIV/AIDS..." (Focus Group Discussion 2, Participant 1).

4 Discussion:

The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of the urban host community towards urban refugees living in Mbarara city in southwestern Uganda. Three major themes were generated from the findings which included economic, political, and socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes towards urban refugees.

We found that refugees are regarded as competitors by the locals in the labor market. We argue that an influx of urban refugees leads to a composition of an expansive supply of cheap labor into the market, especially for unskilled labor, this situation is even worsened when refugees are considered by employers as being more efficient and effective in accomplishing particular tasks. Indeed Schneiderheinze and Lücke argue that because of this increased labor supply and increased competition in the labor market, there is a reduction in the cost of labor (Schneiderheinze & Lücke, 2020). Results also reveal that there was a competition by both local community and refugee businesses. A study about host communities' perceived impacts of refugees on North Dakota communities, found that refugees didn't only consume local products but spurred competition with the locals since they were also small business owners (Arseculeratne, 2017).

Findings revealed that refugees led to a scarcity of basic needs and an increase in prices of basic needs especially housing and food items, participants hailed refugees for contributing towards business development in Mbarara city. A systematic review by Verme and Schuettler concerning the impact of forced displacement on host communities revealed that, though refugees cause stiff competition for basic needs and in the labor market, they spend their incomes on locally produced goods and services especially food items, shelter, health and education services thereby leading to increased incomes of the local population (Verme & Schuettler, 2019). Results further reveal that refugees have benefited communities through their excellent technical skills such as tailoring, carpentry, motor vehicle mechanics, etc. A study conducted in Kenya about whether refugees help or hurt host communities found that refugees contribute skills and knowledge to the local community's human capital stock thereby promoting economic relations with the host communities (Alix-Garcia *et al.*, 2018).

Our study revealed that refugees influence the politics of the communities where they stay, through voting for people who give them small tokens but also those politicians who are believed to shield their interests. However, there was a sharp contrast with the existing body of knowledge concerning refugees' participation in the politics of the host country. For example, the legal framework in Uganda prohibits refugees from engaging in formal political activities (Government of Uganda, 2010). However, despite the lack of access to formal political participation in Uganda, Refugee Welfare Committees and refugee-led Civil Society organizations do play a limited but active role as consultative bodies on behalf of the wider refugee community (Andersson, 2016). We argue that this disparity could have been brought about by the timing and nature of participants of the present study. Note that data collection for this study was done during and just after the local council's one national electioneering period which was largely based on community members, not the national register. Secondly, the participants in the present study were largely local council members who had just gone through a chaotic election, this could have influenced their opinion at the time of the study. However, all key informants held an opinion of refugees playing a passive role in the politics of their areas. This is in agreement with a study conducted in Uganda and Kenya where it was found that urban Somali, South Sudanese, and Congolese refugees living in either of the two countries were more concerned with meeting their basic needs than engaging in host country politics (Bekaj & Antara, 2018).

Participants also intimated that refugees compromised security in the communities, they were involved in petty thefts for survival. However, findings also revealed that some refugees were perceived to be involved in gruesome criminology while some have military backgrounds and need to be rehabilitated. Such findings are in agreement with a 2019 UNHCR report on the State of the world's refugees which intimated that refugees have always been a by-product of war and that security concerns motivate state and UNHCR's response operations to refugee flows (UNHCR, 2019b). In the US, Uganda, and Kenya for instance, after the Pentagon twin tower bombing on 11th September 2001, the July 11th, 2010 twin bombings, and September 21st, 2013 Westgate shopping mall shooting respectively, urban refugees in the

three countries have been highly suspected to be agents of insecurity to the community (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016).

Findings also revealed that community members viewed refugees as people who are vulnerable and need to be helped. In this case, the community shared the same social services with refugees with ease. These findings are in agreement with a study about refugee socio-cultural integration and peaceful co-existence in Uganda, where it was found that refugees and host community members were interacting and collaborating on different fronts such as the use of water wells, sharing of schools, health facilities, and doing small-scale business together (Nambuya *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, the International rescue committee in their study "Uganda: Citizens' Perceptions on Refugees Voices of Citizens" finding revealed that the majority of Ugandans (61%) support the integration of refugees into society. Most Ugandans (60%) approve of refugees having freedom of movement, although a significant proportion (31%) disapprove. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of Ugandans (72%) are in favor of allowing refugees the right to work (International Rescue Committee, 2018b). On the contrary, some participants viewed refugees as hostile, intruders and treated them as social misfits by subjecting them to several belittling labels, insults, discrimination, and stigmatization. There is little wonder that Nambuya and colleagues in their study argued that, even though Uganda has an accommodating nationality policy in place, refugees in Uganda were still facing problems of discrimination and stigmatization related to their nationality status (Nambuya *et al.*, 2018). Lastly, results indicated that refugees were being favored by the government of Uganda and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as other Non-Governmental Organizations. In Germany for instance study about refugees contributed less in taxes (Mosel *et al.*, 2019). The same sentiments were reported in Kenya where, 66% of the population thought that the government and the international community paid more attention to helping refugees than helping Kenyans (International Rescue Committee, 2018a).

5 Limitations

The study adopted a cross-sectional design implying that it is subject to biases that were prevalent

in the population at the time of data collection. Just like most qualitative research studies, if not all, focus on a specific issue or phenomenon in a certain population of a locality in a particular context (Leung, 2015), our study was limited to only one urban center, something which comprised its generalizability.

6 Conclusion

The local community viewed refugees as competitors in the unskilled labor market, refugees increased competition for land, basic needs but also competition was reflected in the apprenticeship and entertainment sectors. Refugees were viewed as scammers, criminals, and agents of insecurity.

Refugees we also viewed as being religious people, needy, social misfits and so society stigmatized them although in some cases intermarriages took place between host communities and refugees.

Refugees were considered security threats but also as people who were given preferential treatment by the government, civil society organizations, and the international community. However, the community thought that refugees spurred businesses development in their community. We recommend integration interventions be designed to ensure peaceful and cordial coexistence between the host community and refugees for sustainable development.

7 Ethical approval and consent to participate

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research and Ethics Committee (# 02/12-18). Moreover, the study was registered with the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (# SS4922). Informed consent was also obtained from all study participants.

8 Authors Contributions

BR conceptualized the study, collected the data, analyzed the data, and wrote the initial manuscript draft. GZR, CDS, GZR, and AS supervised, guided the entire study, and revised the manuscript back and forth. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for publication submission.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the financial support of Bishop Stuart University towards data collection activities. We also thank Mbarara University of Science and Technology for reviewing the study protocol and providing the ethical clearances required to conduct the study. We thank all the participants for accepting to take part in the study. We appreciate the contribution of the research assistants in the data collection process.

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