



Negotiating Student Recruitment challenges in Theological Universities in Lusaka District in Zambia

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Abstract

Theological education endures invited enrollment challenges globally, and theological universities in Zambia are no exception. This study explored student recruitment challenges, identified their contributing factors, and examined the mitigation measures implemented by two theological institutions—Blessing University of Excellence and Harvest University—in the Lusaka District. A qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design was adopted to investigate the complex relationships between the phenomenon, context, and stakeholders. Data were gathered through purposive sampling from marketing officers, recruiting agents, registrars, students, and theologians across both universities. The findings revealed that delayed registration and student financial constraints were prominent barriers to recruitment. Furthermore, theological programs were widely perceived as non-lucrative, drawing interest predominantly from individuals driven by a spiritual calling. Institutional hurdles, including a shortage of qualified lecturers, difficulties in contextualizing theology, and unfavorable market comparisons with secular faculties, further compounded low enrollment. The study underscores that persistent under-enrollment risks proliferating untrained clergy and misinterpreting theological doctrines. To curb these challenges, this study recommends lowering tuition fees, employing qualified academic staff, implementing flexible payment schemes, and offering scholarships. Additionally, intensifying digital marketing campaigns and fostering strategic collaborations with other universities and government bodies are vital to enhancing enrollment.

Keywords: Recruitment, theological education, diversification, contextualization, pedagogy

Acknowledgments: This research was made possible through the cooperation and support of Blessings University of Excellence and Harvest University in Lusaka, Zambia. The author(s) are deeply grateful to all the research participants—including the registrars, recruitment agents, theologians, and students—for their time and openness during the interviews.

For citation:

Alfred, K & Armstrong, C. (2026). Negotiating Student Recruitment challenges in Theological Universities in Lusaka District in Zambia. *Radinka in Social Science*, 1(3), 91-103.

Introduction

Theological education is facing a variety of challenges that pertain to the economy, pedagogy, and theology, and these challenges tickle down to recruitment issues in theological universities. Several authors, including (Pali, 2024), have observed that theological education in Africa is facing several complicated challenges. There are four major categories of challenges: access to education, lack of resources, socio-political and socio-economic issues, and Africanised scholarship and curricula. In terms of access, many students in Africa cannot pursue theological education because of financial constraints, limited availability of institutions, and geographical barriers. Socio-political and socio-economic issues such as conflicts, instability, and poverty also contribute to the challenges faced by theological education in Africa. Finally, Africanised scholarship and curricula have become a contentious issue, with some scholars arguing about the adoption of Western theological perspectives, while others advocate for a more locally relevant approach. (Burgess et al., 2023) suggests that the Western approaches frequently influence the content and delivery method of African theological curricula. For Swanepoel there is discrepancy between what the church members need from the church and the content taught in theological institutions, calling for curricula to become more relevant.

(Naidoo, 2022) advocates for competence-based curricula and stresses the need for proper mentorship in theological education to make the application of this even more practical. According to (Knoetze, 2022), the focus of Africanising theological education is centred on the importance of the topics included in the curriculum, the emphasis on skills and abilities, and the distinctiveness of its contribution to the field of theology. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on theological education in Sub-Saharan Africa, disrupting traditional models of education delivery and even threatening the existence of some institutions. Governments worldwide have suspended face-to-face teaching, affecting 95% of the student population and causing significant education disruption. For African higher learning institutions, transitioning from face-to-face to online education delivery has presented challenges in returning to normal learning arrangements (Saif et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for innovation and growth in theological education. In this vein, (Al-Rahmi et al., 2020) remarks that, in recent years, there has been significant progress in information and communication technology, which has resulted in numerous developments in education. The utilization of technology has made information easily accessible and knowledge more widely available, presenting opportunities for teaching and learning.

A prime illustration of technological advancements in the education industry is the establishment of online academic institutions worldwide. How well-equipped are theological institutions in Africa and globally to provide a theological education that can effectively prepare graduates with the required knowledge and skills to live a Christian life and proclaim the gospel in the present postmodern era, with the aim of Christian theological education being the proclamation of the gospel (Wu, 2025). Addressing these challenges require a multi-faceted approach that accounts for the unique needs and perspectives of different stakeholders. Recent

findings from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) by (Çelik & Baturay, 2024) reveal that enrolment numbers at theological schools have remained relatively stable despite the challenges posed by growing religious trends and demographic changes in higher education. However, the report also highlights that 57% of ATS schools have reported a decline in enrolment, which represents a significant increase from the previous year when only 46% of schools experienced a similar decrease. The report implies that approximately 95% of ATS schools offered fully virtual courses in 2020, which may have affected enrolment negatively. The return to in-person instruction may also be a contributing factor to the decline in enrolment, as students may still be hesitant to attend classes in person due to concerns surrounding the ongoing pandemic. Despite these challenges, the report suggests that theological schools have remained resilient and adaptable in the face of adversity.

The ATS has also launched several initiatives aimed at supporting schools and students through these difficult times, including financial aid programs and online learning resources. According to (Tatnall & Fluck, 2022), theological institutions in Africa are varied and include university departments and faculties, as well as seminaries (Haleem et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025), Bible schools, and theological education by extension. Pentecostal charismatic movements and African-initiated Christianity have also introduced new models of theological education in Africa. Since the inception of the Christian church in Africa, theological education has played a crucial role in Africa, argues (Mena-Guacas et al., 2025). The establishment of Christian schools and theological colleges provided formal education and became the foundation of Christian evangelism and ministerial formation across the continent, leading to the establishment of several Bible schools, theological colleges, and institutions of theological education by extension. (McCarthy et al., 2023) also highlights the importance of theological education in producing a political theology that engages with the socio-sphere, demonstrating that theological education plays a vital role in shaping African society's political landscape. (Mhlanga, 2024) question the role of religion in the development discourses of Africa, emphasizing the need for theological education to produce informed theologians, clergy, and laity who can contribute to sustainable development on the continent.

Given this context, the importance of theological education in promoting inclusive and impartial quality education and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all cannot be overstated, as emphasized by (Estigoy, 2021). (Msambwa et al., 2024) argues that theological education and the Church have limitations in solving societal issues, and therefore, their education should extend beyond the Bible. For Churches to operate efficiently and remain impactful, it is vital to have highly qualified individuals who can instruct believers to use their faith as a source of inspiration to bring about a change in their communities (Susilo et al., 2023). This study therefore, aims to delve into the difficulties that theological universities encounter with attracting students, identify the underlying factors that contribute to these challenges, and examine the strategies that theological universities in Lusaka district have implemented to negotiate these recruitment obstacles. This study seeks to comprehensively analyze the recruitment obstacles theological universities encounter in the area and propose effective solutions to address these challenges. Through a comprehensive investigation, this study aims to identify barriers to student recruitment and offer practical recommendations for theological universities in Lusaka district to improve their recruitment efforts.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study, as it prioritizes participants' narratives and contextual depth over quantification in data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016).

Within this approach, a descriptive case study design was utilized. This design is highly suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are highly integrated or ambiguous. As emphasized by Creswell (2018), a research design serves as a structural blueprint that guides the entire scientific process, ensuring alignment between the research questions and data collection.

Participants and sampling

The study was conducted across two selected theological universities in the Lusaka District of Zambia: Blessings University of Excellence and Harvest University. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed direct experience and insights into student recruitment processes. The total sample ($N = 14$) consisted of four marketing officers/recruitment agents, two registrars, four students, and four theologians from both institutions.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

The qualitative data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, examine, and record recurring patterns and themes across the datasets. The analysis followed a rigorous coding process where initial codes were assigned to the raw data, which were subsequently grouped into broader patterns. These patterns were refined to formulate distinct themes with precise definitions and conceptual names. To establish the trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability of the findings, member-checking and double-checking techniques were implemented (Creswell, 2022), allowing the validation of the interpreted data against the participants' actual perspectives.

Ethical considerations

To safeguard the participants' privacy and strictly maintain confidentiality, informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection. No real names or identifying institutional markers were used in the reporting. Instead, unique alphanumeric codes were assigned to the participants as follows:

- Marketing Officers (MO1 to MO4)
- Registrars (R1 to R2)
- Students (S1 to S4)
- Theologians (T1 to T4)

Results and Discussion

Trends in Enrolment of Students in Theological Studies

The study established that enrolment in theological universities has been reduced in the recent past. A theologian and lecturer expressed their thoughts on the challenges faced by this facility. Chaplain 1 responded by offering words of encouragement, suggesting that enrolling more individuals would benefit society. However, Student 2 expressed their discontent with the current situation, stating that the numbers were not favourable. Similarly, Student 4 noted that the program had a relatively low enrolment compared to other similar initiatives. The Dean of Students weighed in, describing the situation as very low and beyond what they had imagined. According to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), however, 57% of ATS schools have reported a decline in enrolment, a significant increase from 2020 when only 46% of schools experienced a similar decrease. Several authors such as (Mosoh et al., 2024), have identified numerous challenges faced

by theological education in Africa these are but not limited to the accessibility, inadequate resources, socio-political and socio-economic issues, and the need for African-focused scholarship and curricula. (Hauschild et al., 2020) includes two global challenges of the twenty-first century, namely economic injustice and ecological destruction, to the aforementioned list.

Challenges Universities Encounter in the Enrolment of Theological Students

In Zambia, universities offering theological education in Lusaka are facing significant challenges with enrolment, this is true of the condition of theological training in Africa facing many complex challenges as arguably noted by (Mensah, 2019) have identified delayed registration for physical and online classes as a major issue in theological education in Africa. Students acknowledge that the problem of low enrolment is because of ineffective administration. Theological students view things through the lens of faith, which can sometimes create conflicts with the practicality of planning at the university. Recruitment Officer 1 observed that not everyone who enrolls in the program aims to become a pastor, which further complicates matters. However, Theologian/Lecturer 1 noted that the faculty faces unique challenges, with many of the students enrolled being older individuals. He argued:

Lack of marketing strategies, marketing officers lack understanding and ability to market theological studies to school leavers because theology is considered a discipline for pastors or for those who wish to become pastors. Parents resist considering theology as a career for their children after completing Grade 12! Career masters in secondary school do not need to present theology as an option for tertiary education.

(Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023), argues that in modern days, progress in information and communication technology has resulted in several developments in education. Theological institutions need to utilize technology as a marketing strategy, as it makes information easily accessible and knowledge more widely available, presenting opportunities for teaching and learning. Student 2 added that theology is often viewed as a non-profitable program, pursued solely by those who feel called by God. Student 3 elaborated on the point, highlighting that many individuals who enroll in the program do not fully comprehend its significance. They often believe that the course is reserved for those called to serve God, rather than appreciating its broader applications. This leads to delayed registration and low enrolment, which creates further administrative challenges. These issues underscore the need for greater support and awareness of theology programs. It is in this vein that (Kunz et al., 2024) question the relevance of theological education in Africa. They emphasised the crucial role of theological education in Africa, which aims to produce informed theologians, clergy, and laity capable of contributing to sustainable development.

The theological education in Africa must emphasize the crucial role of producing informed theologians, clergy, and laity capable of contributing to sustainable development on the continent. Theological education should focus on training theologians and clergy to engage with society and promote sustainable development through their theological insights and practices. (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025) assert that theological education plays a fundamental role in promoting inclusive and impartial quality education, as well as fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all. Therefore, it is essential to diversify theological curricula by incorporating humanities and social sciences to produce capable leaders who can influence the sustainable development of Africa. Universities have been invited to consider the possibility that delayed registration could also be caused by administrative issues by the university, such as inadequate staffing or technology infrastructure, what about students who may not have access to reliable internet or technology, making it difficult for them to register on time. And what the consideration of the issues of conflict

between faith and practicality is not unique to theological education and is a challenge faced by many academic fields.

Factors Leading to Challenges Universities Face in Student Enrolment

Universities offering theological education face a multitude of challenges that have hindered the successful enrolment of students. As Student 2 pointed out, some peers approach their studies with a laissez-faire attitude, which leads to laziness and a lack of commitment towards their academic pursuits. This not only affects their performance but also affects the overall success of the program.

Shortage of Teaching Staff

A recruitment officer highlighted that a lack of lecturers is also a significant hindrance to the program's success. The lack of lecturers was a significant concern for one student, who noted that the return on investment per student is low. This shortage of experienced lecturers makes it challenging to cater to the diverse needs and interests of the students, particularly those pursuing specialized areas of study. According to (Saeed Vakani, 2024), some institutes/seminaries cannot pay salaries to faculty members and staff. Some colleges have not paid salaries for months together. Shortage of proper library facilities and trained personnel is a significant challenge that hampers the provision of necessary theological education in Africa.

Lack of Contextualization of Theological Education in Africa

Theologian and lecturer 1 provided additional insights into the challenges facing the field of theological education. These challenges include the difficulty of contextualizing theology to the African context, as Western traditions have largely influenced theological education. Theological curricula often reflect Western perspectives in both content and delivery methods notes a discrepancy between the needs of church members and the material taught in theological institutions, calling for more relevant curricula. Africanised theology should prioritize action-oriented relevance besides theoretical relevance. Africanising theological education must involve focusing on the curriculum's content, emphasizing skills and abilities, and contributing distinctively to the field of theology.

The Negative Perception of Theological Education

Another challenge is the perception that theology is only for the unlearned, which can negatively affect enrolment rates. Finally, the limited enrolment response is another challenge, which can be attributed to factors such as the lack of awareness of the program's benefits and the limited job opportunities available in the field. Student 1 argued:

Some students have the wrong impression of pastoral work as they are enrolled only to discover the opposite of their preconceived thinking. The other thing is also about character amongst the theologians (learners) For instance, currently, this year there was a modification to the change on the tuition fees that was communicated to the students at short notice and some students even replied to the Management trying to get transfers, Wrong way of resolving issues.

Participants raised various concerns regarding the challenges faced by the faculty of theological studies. One participant, Student 2, noted that the program struggles with low turnout, which makes it difficult to attract potential students. Theology is often regarded as a voluntary career, which can make it less appealing to some students. Chaplain 1 echoed these concerns, adding that distance learning can also be a barrier for some students. These perceptions lead to

further issues. The Dean of Students made several observations in line with this, about the program's challenges. The program faces difficulties because of a lack of value, commitment, and advertisements, as well as poor treatment of students. A lack of financial support from family and church can make it difficult for students to pursue theological education. These challenges must be addressed if the program is to succeed in the future. In this instance, (Ahmad Sa'adi & Ilhamsyah, 2024) advocates for competence-based curricula and emphasizes the importance of effective mentorship in theological education to facilitate practical application.

Perceived Lack of Value of Theological Education

In addition, another student pointed out that theological education is recurrently compared unfavorably to other faculties, which can affect enrolment numbers. This comparison may contribute to students' reluctance to enroll in the program, despite its value. Theologian/lecturer 2 added that insufficient funding for the faculty of theological studies is a reality that the department must grapple with. And further leads to low allocation of resources that may contribute to the faculty's inability to attract and retain qualified lecturers. We may argue then that theological universities must address the concerns about the relevance of theological education into day's society and how this may affect enrolment numbers. They have to address the argument that theology is continually viewed as a less practical and less lucrative career choice compared to other fields and that this perception may deter potential students from the program.

Implications of Low Enrolment in Theological Universities

A recent study has shed light on the various challenges that universities face in providing theological education, and how these obstacles have a direct impact on enrolment trends. The study found that a considerable number of students abandon their academic pursuits without seeking any form of consultation or support, which ultimately results in missed opportunities to complete their faculty. The challenges faced by universities in providing theological education are multi-faceted, ranging from inadequate funding to a lack of institutional support. For instance, Theologian/Lecturer 1 explained that this is a common struggle faced by most universities with theological facilities; while Student 2 expressed concern about the potential implications of low enrolment, particularly the possibility of uneducated preachers in churches, which could result in incorrect teachings.

This study has established that low enrolment levels of theological studies negatively affect the universities and faculties. For instance, Chaplain 1 was concerned about the potential negative impact of the low enrolment numbers. We can therefore argue that low enrolments experienced by theological institutions create a ripple effect that keeps ongoing if not attended to. Universities have to create competitive programs, produce graduates with degrees, and conduct cutting-edge research to satisfy their customers, which include students, parents, churches, state legislatures, employers, and research funders. To achieve this, universities may have to consider adding new degree programs and making existing ones more attractive. He pointed out that the program's marketing approach was not effective, and there were no entrance qualifications for students who wanted to enrol in degree programs. It has been established that low enrolment can significantly affect the financial stability, academic quality, and reputation of theological institutions. A decline in student numbers results in decreased revenue, causing budget cuts, layoffs, and a reduction in the quality of academic programs. This can lead to a further decline in the institution's reputation, making it harder to attract new students and faculty members. The study has established that a concerning lack of diversity, both in terms of student enrolment and faculty representation, marks the current state of theological education. This lack of diversity may have significant implications for the overall quality and relevance of theological education, as well as for the ability of institutions to attract and retain a diverse range of students. Without a more concerted effort to

address these issues and increase diversity within theological education, enrolment numbers will probably continue to suffer and the field will struggle to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of an increasingly diverse society.

Measures for Universities to Curb Low Enrolments

According to the findings of a recent study, many universities that offer theological education are currently facing significant enrolment challenges within their theological faculties (Henson et al., 2025). The study involved interviewing various participants who provided thoughtful insights and suggestions on how to address these challenges. The participants highlighted several factors affecting enrolment, including changing societal attitudes towards religion, limited career prospects for graduates in the field, and the high cost of theological education. Some of the suggested solutions included developing more flexible program options, increasing financial aid and scholarships, and partnering with churches and other religious organizations to promote the value and importance of theological education.

Strive Towards Making Theological Education Accessible and Attractive

According to the study, both universities should work towards making theological education more accessible and attractive despite the difficulties faced in enrolling students. The recruitment officer suggests promoting the theological programs on social media platforms and distributing flyers to churches and provinces. The universities have also reduced the fees for theological programs to accommodate students. Student 2 emphasizes the importance of acquiring theological studies to sanitise church leadership in an increasingly complex world. Chaplain 1 recommended lowering fees for these programs to make them more accessible to students. Student 3 suggested that the institution should focus on hiring qualified and engaging lecturers, advertising the courses effectively, and fostering student engagement to maintain strong relationships. Student 5 had a distinct suggestion - offering flexible payment methods and part-time studies to make the programs more viable for a wider range of students. The Dean of Students recommended sensitising introduced scholarships to further reward students to pursue theological studies at the institution. To improve accessibility to theological education, (DeHart, 2024) recommended developing a theological education that can appeal to and be easily accessed by most of these leaders.

Investing in Teaching Staff and Promoting the Relevance of Theological Education

The study has revealed that the two universities needed to invest in teaching staff to improve the confidence of would-be students and boost the enrolment levels. Student 3 suggested that the institution should focus on hiring qualified and engaging lecturers. This resonated with theologians/lecturers 1 and 2 that theological universities needed to invest in qualified lecturers and staff to add value and make the studies attractive and competitive (Singgih et al., 2022). One of the major challenges facing theological education is the lack of interest and awareness among potential students. Many students may not see the practical value of theological studies in their future career, which raises concerns about the relevance of theological education in today's world. Potential students may not show interest or awareness in theological studies because of the perception that it is only for religious leaders or that it is not a viable career path in today's job market. As a result, theological institutions need to address these concerns and promote the value of theological education not only for religious leaders but also for individuals seeking to make a positive impact on their communities and society at large. (Kromydas, 2017) argue that theological education is highly relevant in Africa's development discourse. They stress the importance of producing well-informed theologians, clergy, and laity through theological education who can contribute to sustainable development across the continent.

Up-scaling the Marketing and Advertisements to Fit the Modern Times

The findings of a recent study have shown that theological universities can overcome their enrolment challenges. The study participants proposed various solutions during a discussion on theological education. Student 3 suggested that challenges are temporary and encouraged everyone to persevere (Teixeira, 2023). Student 1 suggested advertising as a potential solution. A theologian/lecturer emphasized the importance of digital marketing and offering full scholarships to attract students. Theologian and lecturer 2 recommended that the department should hire an experienced marketer with an understanding of theology and provide resources that are necessary to make a real impact. (Sporn & Godonoga, 2024) suggests that theological institutions can broaden their recruitment efforts by boosting their social media presence and teaming up with other organizations to offer continuing education courses.

Diversification of Theological Education, Research and Teaching to Meet Public Relevance

The study has shown that universities needed to diversify theological education, research, and teaching to meet public relevance (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024). For instance, student 3 proposed introducing multiple programs to help cover costs, while a chaplain recommended making the institution more user-friendly. Another student recommended providing unique studies, qualified lecturers, and a well-structured course of studies (Marginson, 2016). Another student suggested offering a payment system through the school account. Theological universities must adapt to the changing times by broadening their research and teaching horizons, focusing on issues that are of public relevance at the intersection of religion and society. (Alzahmi et al., 2025) invites theological institutions to stay relevant by engaging contextually with society, practising interdisciplinary theology, engaging in interreligious dialogue, and remaining connected to faith communities (Sosa-Díaz et al., 2025). To encourage diversity, theological faculties have been inspiring both students and professors to think more independently, while learning from their peers who belong to different traditions and religions. The theological faculties must also ensure that the customs and beliefs unique to each tradition are actively retained and passed down to future generations (Monteiro et al., 2021).

Collaboration Between Theological Universities and Other Institutions

To improve enrolment levels, the universities need to collaborate with other theological universities and institutions to learn from them (De Schepper et al., 2023). For instance, Theologian/lecturer 2 proposed collaboration between universities, church mother bodies, and the government to stimulate theological discussions and support theological education in Zambia. Another theologian/lecturer shared several ideas, including investing financial resources in the department, revising courses and materials, offering bursaries, employing a marketing officer who understands theology, using social media platforms, and introducing shorter courses (Schipper, 2024). Finally, the Dean of Students recommended fair pricing of programs, relevant coursework, and increased advertising. (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2024) has claimed that the higher education model has shifted from a social institution to an industry. So, to satisfy their customers, which include students, parents, churches, state legislatures, employers, and research funders, universities must develop competitive programs, produce graduates with degrees, and conduct advanced research (Resch et al., 2020).

The Employment of Shared Governance of Theological Institutions

The current enrolment challenges facing theological institutions are complex and multifaceted. With the rising cost of college and the increasing popularity of online learning, some students may not see the value of pursuing a degree in theology. These challenges are not unique to theological education but reflect broader societal issues that are shaping the landscape of

education and religion. Universities can employ shared governance of theological institutions with other institutions and governing bodies of higher learning institutions. Theological institutions can leverage shared decision-making by establishing a community advisory board and engaging community and business partners.

Conclusion

This study has established that the majority of students in these programs are older individuals who view theological education as a non-profit program to be pursued only by those who feel called by God. Financial constraints are also a concern for some students who lack sponsors. These challenges highlight the need for greater awareness and support for theological education programs. The challenges facing theological education include a laissez-faire approach to studies, a lack of lecturers, difficulty in contextualizing theology to the African context, low enrolment, distance learning, and unfavorable comparison to other faculties. A lack of value, commitment, and advertisements, as well as a lack of financial support from family and church, contribute to the difficulties facing the program. Lack of qualified lecturers and insufficient reading materials exacerbate the problem, and low turnout is a significant issue. The study has proposed several measures to address enrolment challenges faced by theological universities. These include advertising programs for churches and provinces, reducing fees, employing qualified lecturers, and offering flexible payment methods and part-time studies. To improve student recruitment levels, theological universities must consider fair pricing of programs, relevant coursework, and increased advertising. Introducing multiple programs to help cover costs, making the institution more user-friendly, providing unique studies and qualified lecturers, offering a payment system through the school account, and collaborating with other universities and government bodies may prove beneficial. The study suggests that theological universities invest financial resources in the department, revise courses and materials, offer bursaries, employ a marketing officer who understands theology, and use social media platforms to reach a wider audience.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no competing interests.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Author contribution

Kapepe Alfred: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing-original draft preparation, Visualization; Chanda Armstrong: Investigation, Supervision, Software, Validation, Writing-reviewing, and editing.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Grammarly in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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