

THE PHENOMENON OF AMBIGUITY IN ONLINE NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON KOMPAS.COM

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Abstract : *This study aims to identify and analyze the phenomenon of grammatical ambiguity in the headlines of the online newspaper Kompas.com. Ambiguity in news headlines has become an interesting phenomenon in the digital era because it can affect readers' understanding of the information conveyed. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to analyze 10 news headlines from Kompas.com from October 2 to November 2, 2025. Data collection techniques use the observation method with note-taking, while data analysis refers to the concept of syntactic-level grammatical ambiguity, including phrase, clause, and sentence structures. The results of the study show that grammatical ambiguity in Kompas.com headlines appears in various forms, including unclear subject-object-predicate relationships, uncertain word references, the absence of relational markers, and dense sentence structures without conjunctions. These findings indicate that although Kompas.com is a highly credible media outlet, the phenomenon of ambiguity still occurs due to the pressure to create headlines that capture readers' attention. This study contributes to the field of applied linguistics, particularly media discourse analysis, and can serve as a reference for journalism practitioners in crafting effective news headlines without sacrificing clarity of meaning.*

Submit:

Review:

Publish:

Keyword: *Grammatical Ambiguity; News Headlines; Online Media; Kompas.com; Syntactic Analysis.*

Abstak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis fenomena ambiguitas gramatikal pada judul berita di surat kabar daring Kompas.com. Ambiguitas pada judul berita menjadi fenomena yang menarik di era digital karena dapat memengaruhi pemahaman pembaca terhadap informasi yang disampaikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif untuk menganalisis 10 judul berita Kompas.com yang dipublikasikan pada periode 2 Oktober hingga 2 November 2025. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui metode observasi dengan teknik catat, sedangkan analisis data mengacu pada konsep ambiguitas gramatikal pada tataran sintaksis yang meliputi struktur frasa, klausa, dan kalimat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas gramatikal pada judul berita Kompas.com muncul dalam berbagai bentuk, antara lain hubungan subjek-predikat-objek yang kurang jelas, acuan kata yang tidak pasti, tidak adanya penanda hubungan antarkata atau antarklausa, serta struktur kalimat yang padat tanpa penggunaan konjungsi yang memadai. Temuan ini menunjukkan

JURNAL SOMASI

SOSIAL HUMANIORA KOMUNIKASI

bahwa meskipun Kompas.com merupakan media yang memiliki tingkat kredibilitas tinggi, fenomena ambiguitas gramatikal masih ditemukan sebagai konsekuensi dari tuntutan penyusunan judul yang ringkas dan mampu menarik perhatian pembaca. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam bidang linguistik terapan, khususnya analisis wacana media, serta dapat menjadi referensi bagi praktisi jurnalistik dalam menyusun judul berita yang efektif tanpa mengurangi kejelasan makna.

Kata Kunci: Ambiguitas Gramatikal; Judul Berita; Media Daring; Kompas.com; Analisis Sintaksis.

Citation :

PENDAHULUAN

The digital era has fundamentally transformed the Indonesian mass media landscape. The shift from print to online media has made people increasingly dependent on online news portals as their primary source of information due to their accessibility to anyone, anytime, and anywhere (Hidayat et al. 2021). Data shows that the number of online news readers in Indonesia continues to increase, with internet penetration reaching over 80.66% of the population by 2025 (Mediana, 2025). This shift in news consumption patterns has not only impacted how people obtain information but also transformed the way media present their content. In today's fast-paced information flow, news headlines play a vital role in triggering readers' initial attention. Without a compelling headline, news content can be overlooked, even if its substance is important. Therefore, headline writing is a crucial aspect of online media editorial strategies.

In digital journalism, headlines serve not only to convey information but also as a tool to attract readers' clicks (clickbait) (Bustam, 2018). stated that news headlines (headings) generally serve to attract readers' attention, summarize the content of the news, help set the tone of the media, and depict the mood of the news. However, sometimes, to increase readership and engagement, editors often use provocative diction or sentence structures designed to arouse curiosity. This attention-grabbing technique indicates a shift from objective information delivery to a struggle for attention (attention economy). As a result, ethical aspects and clarity of meaning in headline writing are sometimes sacrificed for the sake of appeal. This situation presents new challenges in media linguistic analysis, particularly regarding the phenomenon of ambiguity that arises from language play. Thus, news headlines cannot be viewed simply as technical elements, but rather as strategic linguistic phenomena worthy of in-depth study.

Ambiguity is one consequence of the language play used in the construction of online news headlines, which is increasingly prevalent in everyday life (Tania, 2023). Ambiguity of meaning can arise because language structures allow for more than one interpretation, both at the lexical and grammatical levels (Diani et al. 2022). This phenomenon opens up opportunities for diverse interpretations among readers and, if not managed properly, can obscure the original meaning of the news and lead to misperceptions about the content. Therefore, ongoing research into ambiguity in news headlines is necessary, especially in highly credible media outlets.

While numerous studies on ambiguity in online news headlines have been conducted on media outlets such as Okezone.com (Putri & Puspawati, 2021), Tribunnews.com (Rosalia et al. 2023), and Sindonews.com (Ramadhan et al. 2022), similar studies on Kompas.com, a major media outlet with a high reputation, are still very limited. Kompas.com is known for its rigorous editorial curation process, high journalistic standards, and credibility built over decades since the print era. However, in the competitive world of digital journalism, even

a media outlet like Kompas is not entirely immune from the pressure to attract readers' attention through engaging headlines. This gap prompted research to analyze ambiguity in Kompas.com headlines, representing high-quality mainstream media.

Therefore, research into ambiguity in Kompas.com news headlines is highly relevant and urgent. This study aims not only to identify the forms of ambiguity that arise at the grammatical level, but also to analyze their function and implications for the formation of meaning and reader understanding. From an academic perspective, this research can enrich the body of applied linguistics studies, particularly in the realm of media discourse analysis and semantics. From a practical perspective, the results can serve as evaluation material and considerations for the editors of Kompas.com and other media outlets in crafting effective headlines without sacrificing clarity and accuracy of information. Thus, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to improving the quality of public communication and media literacy in the digital era.

METODE

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to analyze the phenomenon of grammatical ambiguity in news headlines in depth and systematically. According to Mukminin & Putra (2024), descriptive qualitative methods are used to uncover meaning and explore the context of the use of language style, in this case, to reveal ambiguity in news texts in online media. As stated by Sudaryanto, descriptive research in the field of linguistics is a type of research that does not alter the analyzed data (Anasera et al. 2024). This method was chosen because the study aims to describe grammatical ambiguity in Kompas.com news headlines without manipulating the data, with a specific focus on the syntactic level, including phrase, clause, and sentence structure.

The data source for this study was news headlines from the Kompas.com website from October 2 to November 2, 2025, with a total of 10 headlines containing grammatical ambiguity. Kompas.com was chosen as the research object due to its reputation as a credible and trusted online news media in Indonesia. However, its news headlines are not immune to potential grammatical ambiguity, which is interesting to examine linguistically. A one-month data collection period was deemed representative enough to obtain up-to-date and relevant data on a variety of news topics. The random selection of news topics was intended to obtain a variety of sentence structures across various contexts, allowing for a more objective and comprehensive analysis of grammatical ambiguity. Data collection was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting data based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Deriyanto, 2018), namely news headlines indicated as containing elements of grammatical ambiguity or ambiguity of meaning that could lead to multiple interpretations (Anasera et al. 2024).

The data collection technique in this study employed the listening and note-taking method, as proposed by Anasera et al. (2024). The listening and note-taking technique is a method used by researchers to observe language use, both spoken and written. The listening stage was conducted by researchers carefully reading and observing news headlines published on the Kompas.com website to identify headlines containing grammatical ambiguity at the syntactic level. Note-taking is a follow-up method carried out after data collection, in which researchers systematically record news headlines suspected of containing grammatical ambiguity using data cards or data classification tables to facilitate data classification and analysis (Anasera et al., 2024).

The data analysis in this study utilized Trismanto's (2018) understanding of grammatical ambiguity, which states that grammatical ambiguity occurs during the formation process at the morphological (morpheme and word) and syntactic (phrase, clause, and sentence) levels. Because this study focuses on syntax, the analysis was directed at the syntactic level, where ambiguity arises in phrases, clauses, and sentences that have more than one interpretation when combined (Muttaqin & Subiyanto, 2021). Diani et al. (2022) added that grammatical ambiguity can be avoided through clear context, the use of boundary markers such as punctuation, and careful grammatical structure by paying attention to the semantic features of words.

The data analysis was carried out systematically through several steps, as adapted from Ramadhan et al. (2022) and Anasera et al. (2024). The first stage was to identify and collect all news headlines from Kompas.com containing grammatical ambiguity, particularly at the syntactic level, as noted during the data collection stage. The second stage was to describe the multiple meanings emerging from each headline containing grammatical ambiguity and to explain the factors causing this ambiguity by referring to the news context and syntactic structure. The final stage was to draw conclusions based on the data analysis results obtained from the research.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

This section presents the findings from the analysis of ambiguity in the news titles that were previously collected and then presented in tabular form to provide a clear picture of the emergence of ambiguity in the news titles that were the object of the research.

Table 1. Distribution of Ambiguity Data	
Publication Date	News Title
October 2, 2025	Mengapa Relasi Sejumlah Kepala Daerah dan Wakilnya Tak Harmonis?
October 9, 2025	Orang Tua Para Korban Salah Tangkap dan Penyiksaan Polisi Magelang Akan Melapor
October 12, 2025	Perahu Retak Kepala Daerah
October 16, 2025	Pemecatan Kluivert, Respons Instan PSSI
October 20, 2025	Wakil Menteri Haji Dahnil Anzar, Berlari Siapkan Penyelenggaraan Haji
October 21, 2025	Singgung Abolisi Tom Lembong, Lima Bos

October 22, 2025	Perusahaan Swasta Minta Dibebaskan
October 22, 2025	Kereta Cepat, Bangsa Tertinggal
October 28, 2025	Jebakan Laga Tandang Manchester City Berakhir
November 2, 2025	Memastikan Transfer ke Daerah untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah
	Sains Warga untuk Pemetaan Lamun

Based on the data presented in the table above, it appears that ambiguity in news headlines has diverse characteristics with varying levels of occurrence. These findings provide a basis for a more in-depth discussion regarding the possible interpretations by readers that may arise due to the existing ambiguity. The following discussion will elaborate in detail on each category of ambiguity found, along with concrete examples and linguistic analysis.

Table 2. Ambiguity Data No. 1

Publication Date	News Title
October 2, 2025	Why The Relationship Between Regional Heads and Their Deputies Is Not Harmonious? Mengapa Relasi Sejumlah Kepala Daerah dan Wakilnya Tak Harmonis?
Ambiguity	It is not clear how many there are

The sentence “Mengapa Relasi Sejumlah Kepala Daerah dan Wakilnya Tak Harmonis?” exhibits a clear case of structural ambiguity, which arises from the indeterminate syntactic configuration of the phrase “sejumlah kepala daerah dan wakilnya.” This phrase can be parsed in two distinct structural interpretations. In the first interpretation, it forms a single coordinated unit—“kepala daerah” dan “wakilnya”—in which the possessive marker “nya” functions anaphorically, referring back to kepala daerah. Under this reading, the question refers to the relationship between each kepala daerah and wakilnya within the same pair.

In the second interpretation, the phrase represents a coordination of two separate noun phrases—“kepala daerah” dan “wakilnya”—where “nya” refers to an external antecedent not explicitly present in the headline. This yields a different reading: the relationship between a group of regional heads and a distinct group of deputies associated with another entity. The ambiguity stems from the unclear scope of both the possessive element “nya” and the conjunction “dan,” each of which can attach at different syntactic levels. Because of this, the surface form permits multiple structural analyses, making the intended relational interpretation unclear.

Table 3. Ambiguity Data No. 2

Publication Date	News Title
October 9, 2025	Parents of Wrongly Arrested Victims and Torture by Magelang Police Will Report? Orang Tua Para Korban Salah Tangkap dan Penyiksaan Polisi Magelang Akan Melapor?
Ambiguity	Unclear Who Will Report it.

The headline “Orang Tua Korban Salah Tangkap dan Penyiksaan oleh Polisi Magelang Akan Melapor” contains a clear case of grammatical ambiguity arising from an unclear syntactic structure, particularly regarding the identification of the subject and object. The phrase “akan melapor” may be interpreted as referring either to “orang tua korban” or to “Polisi Magelang”, which creates uncertainty about who is actually performing the act of reporting. The segment “penyiksaan oleh Polisi Magelang” is likewise ambiguous because it can be read as indicating either that the police are the perpetrators of the torture or, in another reading, the victims. Additional ambiguity stems from the relationship between “salah tangkap” and “penyiksaan,” as the headline does not make it clear whether the torture is part of the wrongful arrest or a separate event. The compressed structure, absence of clear connectors, and lack of explicit prepositional cues all allow multiple plausible interpretations.

Table 4. Ambiguity Data No. 3

Publication Date	News Title
October 12, 2025	The Regional Head's Cracked Boat Perahu Retak Kepala Daerah
Ambiguity	Ambiguity of Subject, Object, Predicate

This title contains syntactic ambiguity because the sentence structure does not clearly define the subject, predicate, and object. Literally, the phrase “Perahu Retak Kepala Daerah” (the cracked boat belonging to the regional head) can also be interpreted as “Perahu” (the boat that cracked the regional head) as the subject, while “Retak Kepala Daerah” as the predicate. The ambiguity arises because the VP can be read either as an intransitive action “the cracked boat belongs to the regional head” or as a transitive action, as if the boat “cracked” the regional head’s physical head, which makes the literal reading absurd. The dense sentence structure without prepositions or conjunctions creates ambiguity regarding the syntactic roles of each phrase.

Furthermore, this syntactic ambiguity is exacerbated by the unclear relationship between the noun “Regional Head” and the verb “Retak.” It is impossible to determine whether “Regional Head” functions as the object of the cracking or merely as a descriptor indicating the boat’s ownership. When analyzed formally, the VP becomes the critical point at which interpretations diverge, and the NP may function as either the subject or the object depending on the reading. To eliminate the ambiguity, the title should be clarified using a preposition, for example: “The Boat Owned by the Regional Head Cracked,” so that the structure of the NP and VP becomes clearer and the literal meaning of the word “Head” does not lead to misinterpretation.

Table 5. Ambiguity Data No. 4

Publication Date	News Title
October 16, 2025	Kluivert's Dismissal: PSSI's Instant Response Pemecatan Kluivert: Respon Instan PSSI
Ambiguity	Lack of Relationship

The headline “Pemecatan Kluivert, Respons Instan PSSI” contains a clear case of grammatical ambiguity, particularly in the syntactic relationship between the phrases “Pemecatan Kluivert” and “Respons Instan PSSI.” The ambiguity arises because there is no explicit relational marker connecting the two phrases. In the first interpretation, the comma functions as a sequential marker, separating two distinct events: pemecatan terjadi terlebih dahulu, followed by respons instan PSSI (two separate actions occurring in sequence). In the second interpretation, the phrase “Respons Instan PSSI” operates as an appositive, serving as descriptive information that characterizes “Pemecatan Kluivert” itself (as if the response is inherent in the nature of the act of dismissal).

This ambiguity is reinforced by the presence of verbal ellipsis (*elipsis verbal*), which leaves the sentence structurally incomplete. With no explicit verb linking the two phrases, readers must infer the logical relationship on their own. Adding verbs such as “memicu” or “adalah” would resolve the ambiguity. The use of a comma in news headlines frequently triggers this kind of grammatical ambiguity, as it can be interpreted either as a coordinative marker or as an appositive marker depending on the context.

Table 6. Ambiguity Data No. 5

Publication Date	News Title
October 20, 2025	Wakil Menteri Haji Dahnil Anzar, Berlari Siapkan Penyelenggaraan Haji Deputy Minister of Hajj, Dahnil Anzar, is preparing for the Hajj.
Ambiguity	Lack of Relationship

The headline containing the verb “Berlari” exhibits a clear case of lexical ambiguity. In Indonesian, “berlari” carries both a literal meaning an actual physical act of running and a figurative meaning, functioning as a metaphor for working very quickly, hurriedly, or under urgent pressure. Under the literal interpretation (*makna literal*), readers may arrive at an odd or implausible understanding: that Dahnil Anzar is physically running around while preparing for the hajj (seolah ia benar-benar berlari-lari secara fisik), which clearly does not describe the behavior of a high-ranking official.

The figurative interpretation (*makna figuratif*), which is more plausible in formal news contexts, indicates that Dahnil Anzar is working swiftly or under time pressure (*bekerja sangat cepat/tergesa-gesa*) to prepare the hajj administration. This phenomenon shows that readers must engage in early-stage mental disambiguation (*proses disambiguasi mental pada tahap awal pemrosesan bahasa*), because the verb “berlari” allows multiple interpretations that only context can resolve.

Table 7. Ambiguity Data No. 6

Publication Date	News Title
October 21, 2025	Singgung Abolisi Tom Lembong, Lima Bos Perusahaan Swasta Minta Dibebaskan

	Five Private Company Bosses Demand Release Regarding Tom Lembong's Abolition
Ambiguity	The Reference to the Word "Request Release" Is Unclear

The headline containing the phrase “Minta Dibebaskan” exhibits a clear case of grammatical ambiguity, arising from the unclear referential target of the passive construction. In the passive form “minta dibebaskan”, the agent of the request “Lima Bos Perusahaan Swasta” is explicit, but the patient (yang diminta untuk dibebaskan) can refer either reflexively to the businessmen themselves or externally to Tom Lembong. This phenomenon also involves referential ambiguity, as there are two potential antecedents: “Tom Lembong” and “Lima Bos Perusahaan Swasta.” The initial dependent clause “Singgung Abolisi Tom Lembong” primes the reader to treat Tom Lembong as the primary topic (topik utama), thereby supporting the interpretation that he is the one being requested to be freed. However, the syntactic subject of the main clause “Lima Bos” is structurally closer to the verb “dibebaskan,” which strengthens the reflexive interpretation (bahwa yang diminta dibebaskan adalah mereka sendiri). This ambiguity demonstrates how syntactic distance (jarak sintaksis) and information hierarchy (hierarki informasi dalam wacana) can shape the reader’s interpretation of referential relations in news headlines.

Table 8. Ambiguity Data No. 7

Publication Date	News Title
October 22, 2025	Kereta cepat, Bangsa Tertinggal High-Speed Trains, a Left Behind Nation
Ambiguity	Structural Ambiguity

This headline contains syntactic ambiguity stemming from the placement of two short phrases—“Kereta Cepat” and “Bangsa Tertinggal”—without any explicit connector. The first phrase functions as a noun phrase (NP) that establishes the topic, while the second phrase can be interpreted as a verb phrase (VP) or as an independent clause describing a state. Because there is no connective such as “sehingga” or “membuat”, the reader must infer the logical relationship between the two, producing multiple interpretations. The headline also employs an elliptical journalistic structure, omitting the syntactic elements that would normally signal the intended meaning. This ellipsis obscures the roles of subject, predicate, and agent, prompting the reader to perform early-stage disambiguation. In one possible reading, “Kereta Cepat” is understood as the cause that leads to the condition expressed by “Bangsa Tertinggal”; in another, the two phrases are interpreted contrastively, suggesting that the nation remains “tertinggal” despite the presence of a “kereta cepat”. These competing interpretations arise because the headline provides no grammatical cues that indicate whether the intended relationship is causal or merely juxtaposed. As a result, the reader must rely on pragmatic inference rather than syntactic

structure, illustrating how highly compressed headline formulations frequently trigger ambiguity in initial language processing.

Table 9. Ambiguity Data No. 8

Publication Date	News Title
October 22, 2025	Jebakan Laga Tandang Manchester City Berakhir
Ambiguity	Manchester City's Away Trap Ends Ambiguity of Subject, Object, and Predicate

This headline contains syntactic ambiguity because its compressed structure allows multiple grammatical roles for the constituent words. Formally, "Jebakan Laga Tandang Manchester City" can be analyzed as an NP (noun phrase) functioning as the subject, while "Berakhir" operates as the VP (verb phrase) that serves as the predicate. The ambiguity arises within the NP because it is unclear whether "Manchester City" identifies the target of the trap, the location associated with the away match, or the team responsible for creating the trap. The absence of punctuation or explicit prepositional markers produces several plausible readings. In addition, the syntax of the headline reveals an uncertain internal hierarchy within the NP. The sequence "Laga Tandang Manchester City" may be interpreted as a single unit specifying the type of match, or as a modifying phrase attached to "Jebakan" as the NP head. As a result, readers may interpret "Jebakan" as something set by Manchester City, something experienced by Manchester City, or something merely related to an away match involving the team.

Table 10. Ambiguity Data No. 9

Publication Date	News Title
October 28, 2025	Memastikan Transfer ke Daerah untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah
Ambiguity	Ensuring Transfers to Regions for Regional Welfare Lack of Connectivity

This This headline contains syntactic ambiguity because it is unclear who performs the action expressed by the verb "Memastikan". In the surface structure, "Memastikan" appears as a standalone verb, while the phrase "Transfer ke Daerah untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah" functions as its object. The ambiguity arises because readers cannot determine the precise relationship between the verb and the object: whether "Memastikan" directly modifies "Transfer", or whether it refers to the entire event expressed in "Transfer ke Daerah untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah."

A second layer of ambiguity comes from the segment "ke Daerah untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah." It is unclear whether "untuk Kesejahteraan Daerah" specifies the purpose of the transfer, or serves as a broader adverbial phrase

detached from the immediate verbal relation. The dense, connector-less structure characteristic of news headlines eliminates crucial syntactic cues, forcing readers to infer the logical relationship between constituents. This structural compression results in multiple plausible readings: the headline might describe an entity ensuring the transfer itself, the purpose of the transfer, or the broader policy context. Explicit markers—such as prepositions or complementizers—would significantly reduce ambiguity and clarify the intended syntactic relations.

Table 11. Ambiguity Data No. 10

Publication Date	News Title
November 2, 2025	Sains Warga untuk Pemetaan Lamun Citizen Science for Seagrass Mapping
Ambiguity	Ambiguity of Subject, Object, and Predicate

This This headline contains syntactic ambiguity because it is unclear who occupies the subject position and who performs the implied action. In the surface structure, “Sains Warga” appears as a standalone noun phrase (NP) functioning as the topical element, while the segment “untuk Pemetaan Lamun” operates as a purpose-related phrase attached to it. The ambiguity arises because readers cannot determine the precise relational mapping between these constituents: whether the headline implies that citizens engage in scientific activity to map seagrass, or whether “Sains Warga” serves merely as a nominal label without specifying an active agent.

A second layer of ambiguity comes from the phrase “untuk Pemetaan Lamun.” It is unclear whether it designates the intended purpose of the citizen-science activity, the expected outcome, or a broader thematic domain only loosely connected to the implied predicate. The compressed, verb-less configuration typical of Indonesian headline style removes essential syntactic cues—particularly the verb phrase—forcing readers to reconstruct the underlying propositional structure. This structural reduction results in multiple plausible readings: the headline may highlight the citizen participation itself, the goal of mapping seagrass, or the wider context of environmental monitoring. The presence of explicit verbal markers or clearer morphosyntactic connectors would significantly reduce ambiguity and clarify the intended syntactic relations.

UCAPAN TERIMA KASIH

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to Mr. Redika Cindra Reranta for his guidance and support throughout the Syntax course. He has helped our group develop a deeper understanding of syntactic concepts and apply them effectively in the preparation of this journal article. Through his valuable feedback, discussions, and constructive corrections, we were able to refine the quality of our analysis and writing. His dedication and encouragement have been crucial in enabling us to complete this article successfully.

PERNYATAAN KONTRIBUSI PENULIS

The contributions of each author to this article are as follows. MRM, FD played a major role throughout the research process, including collecting example data, selecting and providing relevant references, identifying grammatical ambiguities, and adapting the manuscript to the journal template. NSC supported the study by contributing several data examples and providing additional references that strengthened the analysis. NM contributed by supplying the necessary references to complement the literature review. RCR provided academic supervision, substantive guidance, and editorial support prior to the manuscript's submission to the journal platform. All authors (MRM, FD, NSC, NM, RCR) have read and approved the final version of this article..

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