



## Original Research

# Rompepuertas: An Innovative Approach to Youth Engagement in Museums

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**Abstract:** This study examines the Rompepuertas program, an innovative youth initiative implemented in the municipal museums of Zaragoza, Spain. The program aims to invigorate the city's cultural landscape by actively engaging young individuals, empowering them as pivotal contributors to the reinvigoration of municipal museums. From an institutional standpoint, Rompepuertas serves a dual objective: fostering greater participatory culture within museums and cultivating a stronger connection with young audiences. Employing a pedagogical approach centered on active learning and multidisciplinary education, the program provides young participants with opportunities to delve into museology and activity design. Emphasizing not only audience outreach but also high-quality pre-professional development, Rompepuertas unfolds across two courses, with the first focusing on interdisciplinary training and the second on the planning and execution of cultural activities. Notably, participants play a central role in organizing the Festival Rompepuertas–Noche en Blanco, orchestrating diverse cultural events within municipal museums. The program's inclusive selection process, encompassing students from various educational levels and backgrounds, ensures a diverse array of perspectives, enriching the caliber and relevance of program activities. In summary, Rompepuertas emerges as a potent strategy for fostering dynamic, inclusive, and culturally significant museum spaces tailored to the preferences and needs of contemporary youth.

**Keywords:** Youth, Participation, Art Education, Co-curatorship, Public Engagement, Museums

## Introduction

A young revolution is possible in our museums, in our cultural centers, and in our academic centers. It is possible to change their realities, their structures, and their messages. (Vicente Simon, Cultural Technician of the City Council of Zaragoza, pers. comm., 2022)

Rompepuertas<sup>1</sup> is a youth group program in the municipal museums of Zaragoza, Spain. Initiated by the Zaragoza Museums of the City Council's Culture Service, this initiative seeks to bridge the gap between youth and culture, using the energy and perspective of young people to energize and enrich the local cultural offerings. Made up of a team of twenty-five young people between the ages of 16 to 21, this program is a permanent link between the municipal museums and the youth of Zaragoza, establishing a close connection with their cultural needs and demands.

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<sup>1</sup> Rompepuertas means "door breakers," those who break the door in order to enter. In this context, it makes a reference to young people finding and opening the door in order to be an active part of the Zaragoza municipal museums.

Rompepuertas is a training and action program in which people learn by doing, applying the principles of active pedagogies. The pedagogical objective of the program is to promote learning through multidisciplinary training with a strong recreational and relational component. In the first stage, participants are trained in museology and museography, cultural management, and activity design and then develop cultural activities in municipal museums. These programs are aimed at people in their age range who are more attracted by these proposals than by those designed for adult professionals. Thus, Rompepuertas fulfills a double function, promoting young audiences and including the participants in high quality pre-professional experience. In this way, the young people who take part in the project become active agents in the revitalization of Zaragoza's municipal heritage, history, and art, focusing on attracting their peers to these institutions. In short, Rompepuertas is a co-curation project of public youth programs that materializes through an educational program that promotes actions in the city's municipal museums.

## The Project

From the institutional perspective, Rompepuertas is born with a double objective: to make museums more participatory and closer to the citizens and to attract and strengthen the young public. As is well known, school-age audiences regularly visit museums on educational visits organized by their schools. However, young people often disappear from the museum halls when they enter adolescence. Although the causes of this drop in cultural consumption are justified by multiple factors typical of that age, museums and audience studies value the importance that these cultural institutions can have in the development of these future adults. Curiously, there is a small increase in cultural consumption after the age of 20. At this age, young people resume the habit of visiting museums, now on their own initiative (Mason and McCarthy 2006; Tzibazi 2013; Hughes and Moscardo 2019).

As the authors of the article "What Do Teenagers Think About Museums and Didactics" state, "teenagers do not feel involved in the museum space and this would change if, instead of passive exhibitions and explanations, they were active laboratories and experiences" (Santacana et al. 2017, 23). Therefore, this lack of interest does not lie in the fact that the collection or the temporary exhibitions are not of interest to young people but rather that what does not work is the way in which the public is brought into contact with the subject matter. In other words, it is a question of method but not necessarily of content. While this is good news since it makes it possible to generate programs with young people without having to renew a collection, as will be seen throughout the text, this is not entirely true. Working with young people also influences (and should influence) the content otherwise participation would not be real. To this end, as I have commented previously in my research "In the Way to Become Civic Museums" (Caso, forthcoming), the cultural institution must be willing to allow itself to be permeated and transformed by the collaborations it develops

with a collective or a community otherwise public engagement is compromised and the intentions of creating a closer and more dialogic institution remain a dead letter.

Evidently, Zaragoza's museums are not free from any of these conditions. Like the vast majority of museums, a high lack of interest by the city's young people in their displays and activities has been identified.

It is recognized that there is an intuitive belief that adolescent culture is considered opposed to the high culture that museums transmit. At the same time, it is believed that young people have a bad perception of museums, which they see as boring, educational and preoccupied with the past, in contrast to their interest in the present and the future. (Vicente Simon, Cultural Technician of the City Council of Zaragoza, pers. comm., 2022)

To this general panorama we must add the fact that the municipal museums of Zaragoza, of which there are five, do not deal with subjects that, a priori, attract the attention of young people. One of them is a monographic museum with an excellent collection of works from Pablo Gargallo, one of the most outstanding and innovative sculptors of the twentieth century who combined classicism with experimentation and who created his own language far ahead of his time. The remaining four museums are dedicated to the Roman city, which was named Caesaraugusta. Located on archaeological remains, they bring us closer to the Roman city through its forum, its theater, its baths, and its river port on the banks of the Ebro River. The interest of young people in these museums is limited, and dynamizing a group of young people who would like to develop activities in them seemed, at the beginning of the project in April 2021, the first challenge to overcome.

However, the commitment to the project from the municipality was total from the beginning. This fact is fundamental for everything that has followed. To understand the spirit of this project, before getting to know its program and experiences, it is necessary to look at its name. *Rompepuertas* literally means "break the doors," referring to the widespread idea in critical museology that some people do not "find" the door to museums. It is a way of saying that they are not attracted to or invited by the institution; it is alien and distant. Several authors have written about this idea (e.g., Filipovic 2013; Black 2018; Juan and Lorente 2021) but the clear and direct way Nina Simon (2016) presents the idea of "finding the key" to open that metaphorical door is remarkable. In our case, with the intention of giving it a youthful vis, it is not about finding the key but about breaking down the door—about taking over the museum in a joyful and youthful bustle.

## **The Program**

Rompepuertas is a two-year program, which is divided into two courses. The total number of young participants is twenty-five. Each year a new group begins its journey in the program.

The fourth generation started its first year in November 2024, and the third generation will complete the program in June 2025. As mentioned, Rompepuertas has the pedagogical objective of being an educational and professionalizing project that has a direct impact on citizen participation. A fundamental part of Rompepuertas is dialogue, decision making, and proactivity. The content of the program is flexible and adapted from year to year according to the learning and evaluations carried out. Each course has a syllabus that, as a structure, will guide the sessions. This type of design allows what emerges at each meeting to be unique and to depend, almost entirely, on the decisions made by the participants. We have created this structure with the clear idea that there is always room for the group to take each activity in the direction it chooses. It is in this dialogue and reflection that the group develops the skills and momentum to increasingly take the lead in the project. This way of working allows us to meet our objectives, both in terms of content and production, without knowing in advance what will happen or what ideas will be carried out. Although upon entering Rompepuertas, it is explained to all participants how we work and what the nature of the program is, using this method allows it to become clear, in a very natural way, that it is in their hands to bring their ideas to life.

The first and second years are different. In the first course, which lasts from October to June, the team of participants receives interdisciplinary training in museology, cultural management, and art. In the first part of the course, from October until April, a program of ten sessions of three hours each is carried out. We devote one session to each of the five museums of the municipal network, which makes a total of fifteen hours getting to know each of them. In these meetings, the content of the museums is brought closer to young people through playful and creative activities. The objective is that they get to know and learn to value the heritage of their city, discover how it challenges them, and generate interest. For this we use active methodologies, in which enjoyment and the creation of a group feeling are as important as getting to know the collection of each of the museums. At the same time, in each of these sessions the various fields of museography and museology are presented by the cultural technicians. Finally, creativity is developed through workshops with artists in which they create and think about museums from the point of view of art. This combination of knowledge allows young people to relate to museums from an open and experimental perspective in which they can value their relationship the institution in an autonomous and personal way. Enjoyment is an important key in these encounters since the participants invest a lot of time in Rompepuertas. For this reason, it is essential that they are motivated to attend each meeting, take advantage of the time and opportunities provided, and understand that it is a learning process in which they will develop skills that will be useful in their professional career and life regardless of whether they are dedicated to the field of museums or art.



Figure 1: Session with the Art Collective Desmusea in the Caesaraugusta Theater Museum

In the case of the second course, from October to April, the students develop cultural activities that arise from their own interest. The objective is to program and produce high quality and innovative activities. To this end, the team meets in groups to decide what they want to do and develop a program. This group meets three hours a week. Due to the time constraints and the slower pace of co-curation of public programming with young people, we have developed two major projects in 2024: the design of an exhibition and a one-day festival, both at the Caesaraugusta Theater Museum.

First, the exhibition has been developed by five young people, Irene Domínguez, Alhambra Estabén, Fátima Mejjoud Boukhal, María Palacio, and Antonella Vecchio. It is a retrospective of the contest *Cambia el Museo* [Change the Museum], in which citizens were invited to freely interpret works of art selected from all the museums of the city. Led by the municipal museums, this contest has been held in four editions from 2020 to 2023. During these years more than 650 artists have participated with a total of 897 works submitted. During the co-curation of this retrospective, the young women developed all the relevant tasks for the show to take place. They designed the exhibition, selected the exhibited works, worked as liaisons with all the artists, created the lists of works, designed the graphic design elements, and chose the name, 897, among many other tasks. This project was very special as it inaugurated the new exhibition hall of the Caesaraugusta Theater Museum.



Figure 2: Members of the Team Setting Up the 897 Exhibition

During this same period, October to April, the other half of the second-year team, also five people, decided to create a festival that would be about the concepts of the punk and outsider in art, called Festival Gamberro [Punk Festival]. For more than five months, Natalie Grace Gimeno, Pablo Lallana, Santiago Murillo, Claudia Rivera, and Rebeca Vivas designed a day festival with an art brut workshop, a musical-poetic performance, a screening of experimental short films, a site specific tagging, an ad hoc performance on institutional critique, and a guided tour of the museum. All the activities, except for the guided tour, were commissioned to local artists and collectives of young people in the city. The guided tour was created by the Rompepuertas team, generating the script of a dramatized visit in which eight members of the team participated and narrated, in a humorous way, what it was like to go to the theater in Roman times on the archaeological remains of the Caesaraugusta Theater.



Figure 3: Rehearsals of the Guided Visit at the Theater of Caesaraugusta Museum

This guided tour is an example of the work that can sometimes be done by combining the museum's collection (in this case the archaeological remains) with an activity designed for young people, which in its own terms, can be interesting, educational, and fun for people of their age. To create this tour, the team immersed themselves in active research to learn how it was to go to the theater in ancient Rome. This specific information is not usually accessible to most of the population, so professionals in the field were interviewed. With the data collected, the team designed a script in which the guided tour took place on a theater day in ancient Rome. The guides were actors from a theater troupe, and throughout the tour, the team dramatized, in a humorous manner, issues that happened in that same theater. In this way, the audience had direct access to what it would be like to be a Roman spectator since they were one during the visit. This union of verisimilitude and scientificity together with a young and fresh staging is one of the ways in which to make heritage accessible to new generations. In the previous year, we organized a series of lectures, film forum, and workshops on the connection between folklore and young creation. We also organized a guided tour of the Pablo Gargallo Museum in collaboration with the dance collective La Youth. During this visit, some pieces of the collection were presented using informal language and analogies of the young people's day-to-day manner of speaking, which created a relaxed atmosphere and made the artworks more accessible to the audience. Other pieces were interpreted through the dance of the young cast.



Figure 4: Guided Visit to Pablo Gargallo Museum in Collaboration with La Youth

It is also important to emphasize that in their role as programmers, Rompepuertas only features young artists, as they want to be a platform for their peers, and at the same time attract audiences of the same age range. The team that designed the Festival Gamberro [Punk Festival] have created the concept, contacted all the artists, created the guided tour, produced the event, and created the festival poster. The entire group has been responsible for the communication of each of the events and have created videos with great impact on social networks. As we will see later in this article, Rompepuertas has and runs its own social networks.



After the implementation of the aforementioned activities, from mid-April to June the first and the second year begin to work together on what will be the greatest practical experience of designing and implementing an event, the creation of the Festival Rompepuertas—Noche en Blanco.<sup>2</sup> Each year from April until the end of June, the twenty-five young people design around fifteen cultural activities/actions that will take place simultaneously in four of the five municipal museums, all of which have been conceived and executed by young people. The role of the Rompepuertas team is vital. The team creates the activities, decides where they will take place, contacts the artists who will carry them out, resolves incidents, produces the activities, and works on the production and customer service on the day of the festival. During this stage, two professional sessions are held, one with a cultural technician specialized in programming activities and the other with a professional and prestigious festival organizer from the city. The objective is to give participants access to people who are already working in the sector so that they can learn from their experience as well as make contacts that may be useful in the future.

Evidently, as part of the Rompepuertas, the participants in their first year of the program never created a festival before. For this reason, part of the development work of the festival is to train the young people in how to work in the management of cultural events while they are, *de facto*, creating the festival. The nature of this way of working includes a lot of teamwork, constant decision making, and autonomous responsibilities and tasks. In the three editions of the festival that have taken place, this way of working has been successful. On all occasions there were more than fifty young local artists involved, around fifteen innovative activities, and more than five thousand people in attendance in the seven hours that the festival lasts. Young art fairs, fashion shows and awards, jazz concerts, DJs, MC battles, drag queen shows, theater of the senses, circuses, installations, cinema, games, and poetic actions, among others, have been programmed.



Figure 5: One of the Activities at Festival Rompepuertas—Noche en Blanco 2023

*Source: Maria Muñoz 2023*

<sup>2</sup> La Noche en Blanco [The White Night] is a festivity in which museums are open until late and special activities are programmed.



In addition to these actions, some of the members of the second group have begun an investigation into the reasons why young people in Zaragoza do not visit museums. To do this, they have made an online survey that has been sent to more than twenty schools in the city, from high school to university. More than three hundred people responded. In the coming months, we will carry out the analysis of these data and two focus groups. With the data obtained, the team has decided to carry out a short documentary piece to be able to share it with their peers.

Finally, Rompepuertas has its own profile in two social networks<sup>3</sup> that it co-manages together with the coordinating team. The profiles are managed by some of the members belonging to the Rompepuertas communication group, but the whole team participates in the actions. The team members are very active and autonomous when it comes to creating content and uploading it to the networks and can carry out the content they decide. They have developed many videos to promote the program and its activities, reaching a high-quality level and a large number of views.<sup>4</sup>

While this is a rough outline of what the program proposes, it is difficult to express all that goes into making this happen. The creation of a cohesive group to which all the young people want to return week after week and for which they are willing to work (and work hard) is a fundamental part. For this, during the first sessions they must understand that in Rompepuertas what is decided is done, there are no steps backward (although there are changes and adaptations), the institution is on their side, and we can do things that literally have never been done before in these museums together through dialogue and negotiation. They must also understand that what they learn during the program are useful tools for their lives and that Rompepuertas is not formal education but that we train them very seriously. Finally, what they give to the project they take back with them multiplied as professional experiences and learning to materialize their ideas, which is a great contribution to their self-esteem and the love they develop for being active citizens. The premise has always been that each one of the young people in the group should be active subjects and participants in the museum experience. To achieve this, it is necessary to make a change in the way of understanding and developing programs for young people. This transformation has been achieved by considering that in Rompepuertas their ideas, tastes, cultural consumption, and ways of communicating will always be valued and will guide the content of their cultural proposals.

The nature of Rompepuertas makes it a project whose coordination is particular. Making positive cultural impacts by accompanying young people to materialize their ideas in their city is not a mere production task. The professionals who coordinate the program accompany, facilitate, set limits, encourage, give ideas, and support the young people, but ultimately, the ideas that see the light are theirs. From there, we accompany them to produce them. Although this makes the projects take longer, as we do not know clearly where each step goes; we work in a spiral, not in a straight line, but it is all worth it. This is how we can carry out

<sup>3</sup> Instagram: @rompepuertas.zgz; TikTok: @rompepuertas.zgz

<sup>4</sup> Those visualizations have reached 16k.

ideas with quality, this is how learning is deep and useful, and this is how we create culture with youth participation. Obviously, this requires all the professionals involved to maintain a high degree of adaptability, flexibility of schedules, a trust while dealing with uncertainty, listening, and communicating.

The municipal museums of Zaragoza play several vital roles in the project. They establish administrative frameworks, liaise with municipal authorities, and oversee the project's progress. They work closely with the coordinator to facilitate connections, provide structural support, and promote the project within the city. Additionally, they manage spaces, coordinate the schedule, and perform numerous other supportive functions.

As coordinator I contribute to the project in multiple ways. I design and implement the program, facilitate sessions, and coordinate the team while supporting their autonomy and creative processes. I arrange meetings with youth groups, experts, and artists, and provide targeted training to advance the team's work. Additionally, I manage all team-related communications. Lastly, I engage and inspire the team, helping them become acquainted with the museums within our network and their collections.

For its part, the Rompepuertas team organizes artistic and creative events in the museums from temporary exhibitions to festivals of various artistic disciplines, all with the intention of bringing the museums closer to the young and adolescent population of Zaragoza. It also develops educational initiatives within the museum, including training cycles and meetings with artists and experts. Moreover, it creates community and social activities that connect young people outside the art circuits with the museum and its community. Also, they establish communication networks among young people to disseminate the museums through participation in social networks and youth communication channels. Finally, they constantly evaluate the museums' policies in relation to young audiences, using dynamic evaluation groups and surveys to ensure that the museums are interesting and accessible places for all ages.

## **The Creation of the Group**

One of the reasons why Rompepuertas is interesting for the young participants is because of the other young people they meet and make friends with over the course of two years. Rompepuertas is a group with a certain homogeneity but very diverse. The first selection process was carried out in 2021 with the active collaboration of several educational centers related to art, creativity, design, and image.<sup>5</sup> It was evident that although this is a program

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<sup>5</sup> University centers: ESDA (Aragon School of Design); Make Creative; Faculty of Philosophy and Letters (History). Institutes and schools related to artistic and humanistic activities: School of Art of Zaragoza; IES Pedro de Luna (Baccalaureate in Performing Arts, Music and Dance—Baccalaureate in Humanities and Social Sciences); IES Avempace (Socio-cultural and Tourism Animation—Baccalaureate in Humanities and Social Sciences); Vocational Training Center, CPI Los Enlaces, (Audiovisual and Communication); Network of Youth Centers of the City Council of Zaragoza involved in one of the cultural and artistic projects of this network (between 16 to 18 years old); Workshop Schools or Socio-laboral Centers (between 19 and 21 years old) in Zaragoza

open to all people in the city between 16 to 21 years of age, those who would be most interested in participating were those who were already studying something related to culture, art and history. Although we tried to make the project known in artistic and humanistic training, there was a great academic diversity since the collaborating centers belonged to secondary school, high school, vocational training, and university, which allowed us to have a great diversity of profiles, ages, and interests from the start. In that first selection process we had more than eighty applications. In the following years the collaboration with the centers has been maintained, although in a laxer way since the program has interest among the young people who know about it in more and more educational centers.

Other important values for the conformation of each group are to have young people with diverse cultural backgrounds, a commitment to gender diversity and diverse skills, and the backgrounds from different neighborhoods of the city. Finally, we try to have a balance between the participating ages, generating a similar number of participants from 16 to 18 years old and from 19 to 21 years old since their tastes, experiences, interests, and ways of working may differ in order to find a middle ground. All these parameters are considered during the selection process, which we try to make as simple as possible. In a first phase, we ask them to fill in a form with four questions about their hobbies and interests, their previous participation in some social or community activity, their motivation to participate in the project, and an idea about how we can change the museums to make them more attractive to young people. In general, between sixty to eighty young people apply. Of these, thirty go on to the second round. In this round, which is face-to-face, dynamic, and group-based, the young people are asked to introduce themselves, complete some tasks in a team, and speak in public. In this part of the selection process our goal is not so much to select the brightest students but to create a very diverse group of people with different tastes and interests but who share the motivation to work as a team, enthusiasm to learn about the museums of their city, and desire to create activities and events. From the second generation onward, between five to seven Rompepuertas members participate as jurors in both the first and second phase of the selection process.

Being part of Rompepuertas confers a series of benefits. In the program we try to promote the development of skills such as critical thinking, project leadership, activity development, creativity, and negotiation skills. We also put them in contact with the reality of the professional sector so that they have first-hand valuable pre-professional experience. Moreover, in some of the participating centers, being part of the team is considered in the final grades. Finally, all participants receive a scholarship of 500 euros per academic year.

## Impact

The impact of the project is assessed in two ways. On the one hand, we want to know if the program has an impact on the increase of cultural consumption in museums by the city's youth.

On the other hand, we evaluate the impact that the program has on its participants. As relevant data that begins to answer the first question, we know that the young population that has visited museums rose between 2019<sup>6</sup> to 2022.<sup>7</sup> The rise, albeit moderate, went from 2.85 percent to 3.58 percent in the percentage of the young population between 14 to 30 years old. Our challenge is to re-check these data to know the reality in numbers. However, we can confirm the high presence of young people participating in our activities. As an example, in the 2022 Festival Rompepuertas—Noche en Blanco, out of a total of five thousand attendees, we were able to confirm that 40 percent were young people, which is a very high participation compared to events not organized by Rompepuertas (Zaragoza Museos Internal Report on Audiences 2022).



Figure 6: Young Participants in One of the Activities in Festival Rompepuertas—Noche en Blanco

*Source: Unknown 2023*

Secondly, the evaluation of the program's impact on participants is equally important. As mentioned, it is based on their responses and evaluations that the program is transformed in each edition. Our intention is that the experience of each team sets the path to follow and avoids stagnation in a formula that works. The success of Rompepuertas thrives on the collective contributions of everyone involved. For the project to remain dynamic and for each of us to fully embrace our responsibilities, it cannot become a standardized program. Its vitality depends on our unique and individual efforts. For this reason, at the end of each course we carry out exhaustive evaluations in which each member of the team evaluates and comments on values such as participation, the programs developed, the group dynamics, the development of skills, and possible improvements, among others. From this, we make a

<sup>6</sup> Last year in which data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zaragoza Museos Internal Report on Audiences 2019)

<sup>7</sup> First year that data were collected after the COVID-19 pandemic (Zaragoza Museos Internal Report on Audiences 2020)

detailed analysis of the data collected that are then translated into actions and contents in the following course. For this reason, each course of Rompepuertas is practically tailor-made.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzes the Rompepuertas program, a youth initiative developed in the municipal museums of Zaragoza, Spain. Rompepuertas seeks to revitalize the cultural offerings of the city through the active participation of young people, making them key agents in the revitalization of municipal museums. From an institutional perspective, Rompepuertas has a dual purpose: to make museums more participatory and closer to citizens and to attract and strengthen young audiences. In this sense, the program adopts a pedagogical strategy focused on active learning and multidisciplinary training, offering young participants the opportunity to get involved in museology and the design of activities. This program not only seeks to promote young audiences but also to train participants with a high quality pre-professional experience.

The program is developed in two courses. During the first course, participants receive interdisciplinary training in museology, cultural management, and art, while in the second course they focus on the planning and execution of cultural activities. In addition, participants organize the Rompepuertas—Noche en Blanco Festival, designing and executing various cultural activities in municipal museums. A highlight of Rompepuertas is its inclusive and diverse approach in the selection of participants, ranging from high school to university students with diverse academic, cultural, and gender profiles. This diversity ensures the richness of perspectives and experiences in the group, thus enriching the quality and relevance of the activities developed. In conclusion, Rompepuertas proves to be an effective strategy to make museums more dynamic, inclusive, and relevant spaces for new generations.

## **Acknowledgment**

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The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT (<https://openai.com/chatgpt/>) to synthesize research contents. The prompts used include “synthesize own research contents.” The output from these prompts was used to summarize long texts of project research created by the Rompepuertas team.

## **Informed Consent**

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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