Vietnamese teachers' attitudes toward online professional development programs

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ABSTRACT

In addition to the massive deployment of online learning among students worldwide, virtual training has also become a necessity to ensure the demand of teacher professional development. Exploring teachers' attitudes toward online training programs helps educational stakeholders in understanding their expectations toward professional training modes, which positively contribute to boosting the effectiveness of career development programs. The present study sheds some light on Vietnamese English teachers' attitudes toward online professional development programs. Twenty-five EFL teachers in Can Tho city Vietnam took part in the research by providing answers to the questionnaire delivered using Google Form application; ten of them volunteered to attend further interview sections. The results of pair sample t-tests show that the English teachers preferred face-to-face to online training programs. In addition, the qualitative findings further revealed that they had no offense to online training mode, yet deny its sole implementation for all future professional development activities. Especially, most teachers approved the practice of online training in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, some of them started to acknowledge a blended teacher training program as they are relying in its affordances and accessibility. Considering the crucial role of development programs for teachers, the findings of this study contribute to providing input enhancement for teacher professional training stakeholders in Vietnam.

Introduction

Professional development (PD) is crucial for teachers to achieve sustainable education which is also a vital aspect of teachers' ongoing continuity (Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017). An international survey indicates that teachers made use of their time, on average, 10.5 days per year to participate in courses, workshops, conferences, and seminars in order to enhance their knowledge and skills (Sellen, 2016). Zhang et al. (2020) considered that PD is a critical link to improve teaching. The teachers' goal is clear, that is to attain professional development which closely associated with improvement in income, careers, happiness, and satisfaction (Chetty et al., 2014). It is, additionally, very important for the better academic improvement of learners' (Didion et al., 2020; Lander et al., 2022; Macaro & Han, 2020; Moore et al., 2011; Schellenberg,

2020). The fact that PD is crucial in education engaged teacher professional development stakeholders to develop effective PD programs for teachers in all circumstances.

PD is understood as the process of learning to earn or maintain the professional credentials such as academic degree to both formal and informal form of learning (Speck & Knipe, 2005). It is true that many people refer PD to a formal process including a course colleges or universities, conferences, workshops, seminars, where collaborative learnings among participants happen. PD is also defined as a set of activities occur in informal contexts such as observing colleagues' work, learning from peer, and even independent reading and research (Philipsen et al., 2020). PD not only aims at improving teachers' knowledge of the subject they are taking responsibility to but also increasing their understanding of how the students learn (see Figure 1).
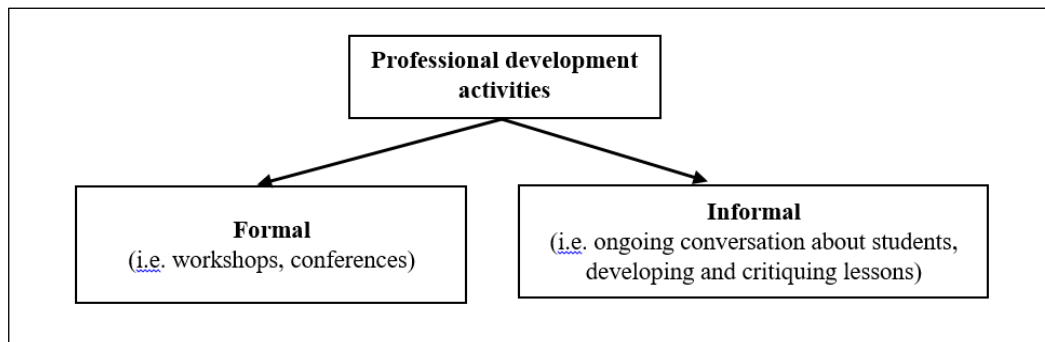

Figure 1. Forms of Professional Development Programs (Drago-Severon & Pinto, 2003)

Approaching PDA in different dimension, the researchers have different ways to classify the PDA. According to Drago-Severson (2002), there are six types of staff development models, including (1) training, (2) involvement-in-an-improvement process, (3) inquiry, (4) observation/ assessment, (5) self-directed, and (6) mentoring (see Figure 2). Drago-Severson and Pinto (2003) also reported there are two forms of PDA: formal and informal; while Louie and Hargrave (2006) divided into three categories, namely (1) formal, (2) ongoing or informal and (3) online professional development (see Figure 3).
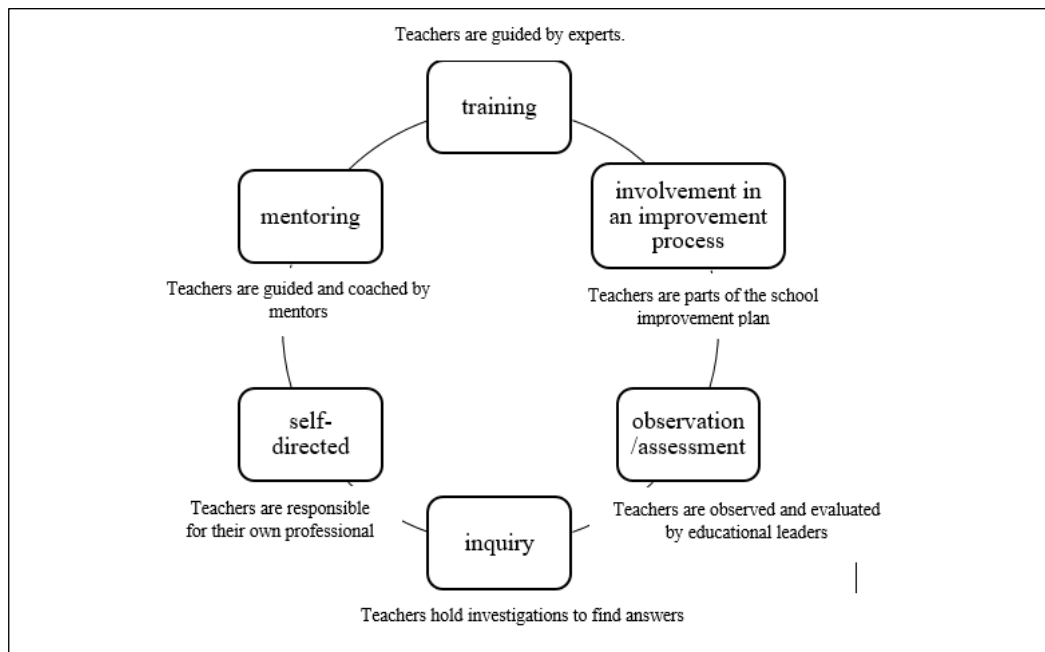

Figure 2. Six Types of Staff Development (Drago-Severson, 2022)

Louie and Hargrave (2006) differentiated PD programs into formal, online, and informal. As shown in Figure 3, formal professional development activities could be in forms of technology workshops, summer institute, credit course, seminars and conferences. A formal PD program is held by an institution or a group of community members that aims to deliver knowledge and to train the participants in a formal context. On the other hand, online professional development program is conducted in a virtual mode by the assistance of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) platforms. The model of online training program becomes a new trend of professional development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, including in Vietnam. Among the formal and online types of PD programs, informal professional development activity is the other alternative. According to Louie and Hargrave (2006), informal PD program includes coaching clinic, mentoring, and co-teaching, with more flexible time and spaces.
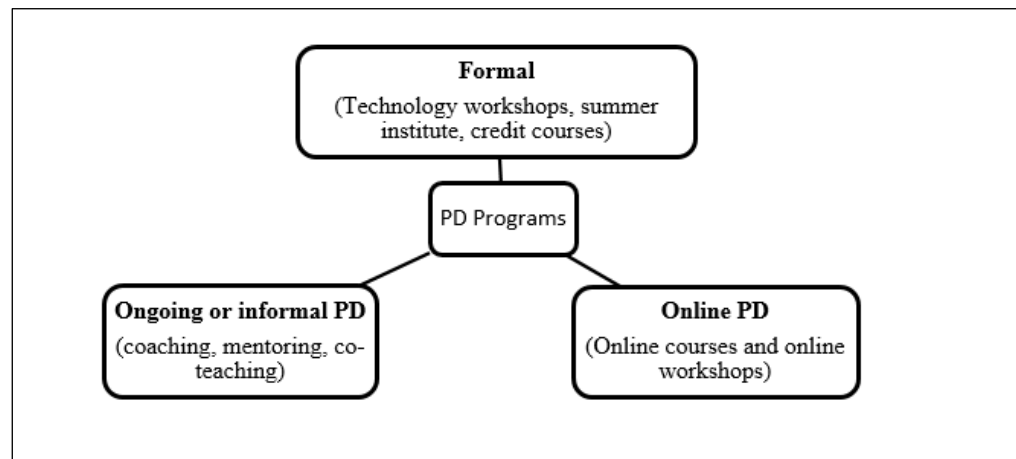

Figure 3. Different Forms of Professional Development (Louie and Hargrave (2006)

A number of research has been conducted in search of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each form of PDA (Adsit, 2004; Barkley & Bianco, 2002; McKenzie, 1998). With regards to face-to-face training programs, Barkley and Bianco (2002) listed the four prominent features when they provide teachers a stimulation environment to learn, direct feedback, time to reflect, and importantly, the threat-free setting for teachers' growth thanks to enhancing social interaction. Critics to this form of PDA, however, confirmed that face-to-face trainings cost a lot of money from educational leaders (Barkley & Bianco, 2002; Sancar et al., 2021). Barkley and Bianco (2002) also reported that they are not really convenient since many teachers avoid professional conferences due to timing and locations.

In terms of online training activities, Russell et al. (2009) pointed out a wide range of outstanding perspectives including the flexibility and greater choices provided for them to be engaged in the learning process. Moreover, teachers working in the remote areas are also able to access professional development programs while the face-to-face delivery mode seems to be more expensive and impractical in their places of teaching. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) believed online professional learning is easy and convenient for teachers, who are ready for participation only with a computer, a modem, and the Internet connection. It brings the good conditions for teachers who find it hard to join face-to-face training programs due to the disadvantages of time and locations (Barkley & Bianco, 2002; Nordgren et al., 2021). Simpson (2022) emphasizes that some online training programs are available twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, which allows teachers to revisit and learn at any time they are ready (Lockee, 2021). Being advocates of the online form of teachers' learning, Adsit (2004) concluded that the online training form helps to engage teachers by providing a plethora of resources that enable teachers to have better practices.

In addition to those above-mentioned benefits of online training activities, there are still a great number of hindrance factors. Hidden costs, which mostly depend on the program format, hardware, software, and the Internet needed, hence, was initially discussed by Dille and Rokenes (2021). Another challenge is fallen into the content of the course delivery, when there are some topics that completely unsuitable to be transferred online (Portillo & Lopez de la Serna, 2021). Other difficulties belong to learner readiness, when teachers are not ready for online course because of lacking motivation, independence, and necessary supports from the instructors; and especially their fears in having failures with technological implementation (Bragg et al., 2021).

Furthermore, previous studies have been conducted in search of investigating English teachers' perceptions toward professional development activities (Hartono, 2016; Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017; Sokel, 2019). Notwithstanding the fact, research on online professional training mode is still limited. In a research of EFL teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of online professional training in higher education in Saudi Arabia, Alzahrani and Althaqafi (2020) found that teachers in their study have positive attitudes toward features of online training courses. Implementations for online training activities providers have been mentioned as well, which include the consideration for teachers' needs and preferences, as well as solutions for hindrance factors.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the time of social distancing, face-to-face professional training programs in Vietnam seem to be impossible for teachers and PD providers. Online training forms, therefore, become a must for teacher development programs in the region. It is the great time for almost teachers who have not yet experienced virtual learning environment to enter the new learning condition. Hence, exploring teachers' attitudes toward online training programs becomes vital to provide an outlook of teachers' preference in forms of taking professional development activities (PDA). On that basis, the current study is hoped to contribute to the literature on professional development programs for teachers in Vietnam. More significantly, the review of literature shows that there are a few number of studies being conducted in the fields of online professional development program in Vietnamese context.

This study aims to shed some light on the attitudes of English teachers in Vietnam, precisely in Can Tho city, toward the virtual professional training programs. In addition, this study tries to find a favorable mode of professional development activities as preferred by the Vietnamese English teachers. Therefore, this study is a worth inquiry to address the following research questions: (a) are there any discrepancies in EFL teachers' attitudes toward online and face-to-face professional development activities? and (b) what is EFL teachers' voice about online professional training activities?

Method

Participants

The purposive sampling technique is applied in this study with the involvement of twenty-five (25) English teachers, who used to experience both traditional (face-to-face) professional development programs and online training programs. They were invited to answer the questionnaire distributed using Google Form in May 2021. Ten of them voluntarily participated in further interview sections, being taken by video calls on Zalo or Facebook, which aims at bringing a safer and more comfortable zone for the interviewees due to the complicated situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview lasted from fifteen to twenty minutes.

As can be seen in Figure 4, among the participants, there are twenty-one female teachers (84%) and four male teachers (16%), in which nineteen of them (76%) are holding Bachelor degrees and the other six teachers (24%) are Master in Education, majoring at English teaching. The most experienced teacher is with 26 years of teaching English and the youngest one has just commenced teaching for eight months. They had

taken at least one professional development activity, and there were three teachers taking part in more than nine training programs and workshops last year.
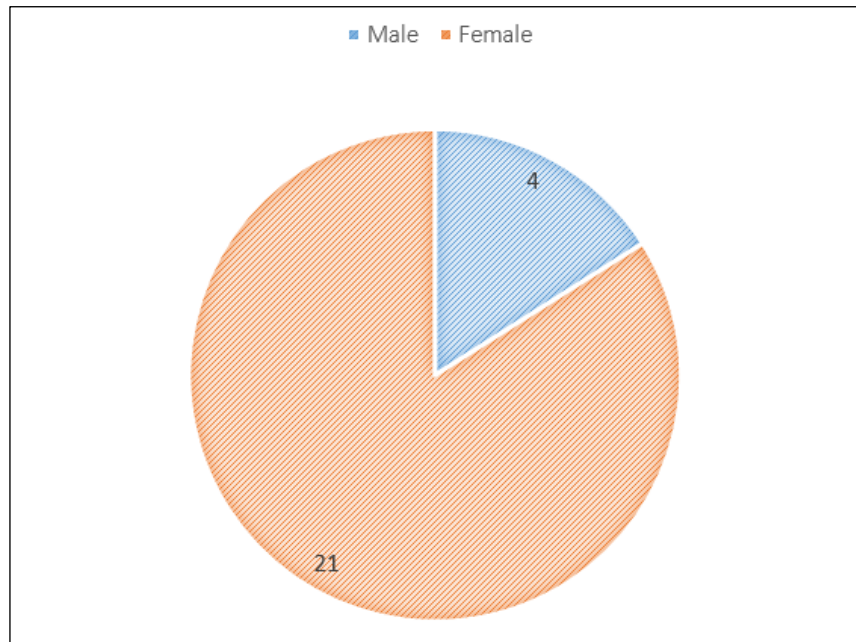

Figure 4. The Participants based on Gender

Instrument and Data Collection

The research adapted questionnaire developed by Adada (2007) as a mean for data collection. It comprises two sections: one of them asked for participants' demographic questions and the other includes 43 items, being designed in the 1-5 Likert scale. In the current study, the selections of twenty items, which mainly serve the research aims, are to measure teachers' attitude toward online PDA. Cronbach's alpha was used to check the reliability of the instrument, which showed that all values are over 0.6 and the Correlated Item-Total Correlations are over 0.3. The questionnaire is, therefore, qualified to be studied in our context. The participants were asked to rate their right feeling to the statements in forms of not at all, low, moderate, high, and very high.

Another set of open-ended questions was also compiled for the interview section. They were used when the participants voluntarily had further discussions with the researchers about the second research question. All questions posed in this round mainly focused on: (a) teachers' preferable form of professional development program, as well as their explanations, (b) teachers' expectations in online professional development program, (c) strengths and weaknesses of online professional development program in compared to the traditional one (face-to-face), and (d) teachers' opinion about online professional development program.

Design of the Study and Data Analysis

A mixed-method study (sequential explanatory research) was conducted to investigate the perception of English teachers in Can Tho city Vietnam toward online professional development activities. A Mix-method study helps to provide deeper and broader understandings of the phenomenon than research that is taken with only quantitative or qualitative approach (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006). In this study, the teachers' perceptions of professional development activities were measured by the questionnaire, adapted from the study of Adada (2007) and compiled twenty items in 1-5 Likert scale. A duplication of ten items were used to investigate teachers' attitudes toward face-to-face and online training activities. Statistical Package for the

Social Sciences (SPSS 22) was used to process quantitative data. Regarding data from the interview, all information after being transcribed, is coded and synthesized to give the final results.

Results

Discrepancies in English Teachers' Attitudes between Face-to-face and Online PDA

Paired sample t-tests were used to examine the differences between English teachers' attitude toward online training activities and face-to-face training activities. Table 1 shows that there is a statistical difference between them (t=2.09, df=24, p=.047). Moreover, the mean of teachers' attitude toward face-to-face PDA (M=3.85) is statistically more positive than that of online PDA (M=3.7).

Table 1. Result of Paired Sample t-test

			Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Face-to-face vs. Online	.15	.34	.07	.002	.286	2.09	24	.047

Table 2. A Comparison between Means of the Two Forms of PDA

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Face-to-face	3.85	25	.4214	.0843
	Online	3.70	25	.4218	.0844

When having a look at the discrepancies in each criterion, there are two items where participants perceived differently. Firstly, it is teachers' judgments about the usefulness of PDA; they perceived that face-to-face PDA is more useful than online PDA, which figures are given at M=4.24 and M=3.8, respectively (t=2.86, df=26, and p=0.09). Similarly, they reported that they received more benefits from face-to-face trainings (M= 4.04) than from online trainings (M=3.72), with t=.32, df=2.32, and p=.029. Others issues related to the importance of PDA, perceived knowledge, teachers' confidence in skills learned, PDA providers' helpfulness and supports, feedback receive during and after PDA, as well as the usability of skills learned, are perceived similarly between face-to-face PDA and the online one.

English Teachers' Preference: Face-to-face or Online PDA?

There is a little difference between what teachers claimed through interviews and quantitative results. When teachers are asked whether they prefer face-to-face or online training programs, it is surprising to see a quite balance between the numbers of nine supporters of face-to-face training and ten teachers are in favor of online training. The other six teachers feel happy with both and they have no more explanations except "*all kinds of training aim at providing teachers useful tips for effective teaching*" (Respondent 03).

Supporting to face-to-face PDA, Respondent 01 said: "*I prefer taking traditional PDA, where all questions posed are solved immediately and effectively.*" It also gives teachers better and more realistic interactions, Respondent 04 added. Having direct training mode also make it easy for teachers to work in group discussion, without being afraid of the Internet connection. Moreover, Respondent 06 highlighted another strength of face-to-face training activities, where the instructors, through their interactions and

observations, grasp the degree of participants' receptions to adjust their speed, re-explain, or even skip some redundant points during the conferences.

In terms of online PDA, most participants highly appreciate the active time and location to take part in the programs. Respondent 10 bravely claimed that it took him no time to move to the workshops; he could master his PD programs at his own pace and of course, with the best quality. *"It would be more significant in the time of COVID-19"*, said Respondent 06.

English Teachers' Expectations toward Online PDA

When being asked for teachers' expectations in online training courses, the result of interview sections recorded a lot of recommendations. Firstly, they all agree with enhancing the interactive characteristics between PDA providers and teachers. Interactions help to optimize the quality of training programs since they bring participants senses of involvement (Respondents 04, and Respondent 05). Timing is also noticed by Respondent 01, Respondent 08, and Respondent 09. They hope the time spent for PDA should be as long as the one for traditional trainings, so that they have enough opportunities to solve arisen problems. In addition, Respondent 09 hoped that online activities should be directly to save time of all participants, rather than wandering a lot on unnecessary issues.

Can Online PDA Completely Replace the Face-to-face Training Programs?

Six teachers say "No" when being asked about the possibility of shifting from face-to-face to online professional development program. They worried a lot in the quality of training, and they believed face-to-face activities offer better conditions for all problems to be tackled. To some teaching methods that need demonstrating, online trainings feel it hard to transfer the true values to participants, which is merely done well when they meet in person and act as if they are teachers and students. There are two participants thinking that online trainings can be merely conducted as regards PDA for teachers in the future, if it can offer more practical activities with clearer objectives and more importantly, the need for stable Internet connections have to be prerequisite.

The remaining participants acknowledged blended teacher training programs. They support virtual trainings in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 06, and Respondent 10 said that teachers sometimes prefer to study at their own zone and time; moreover, the development of technology also ease the teachers with training due to the difficulty to come to the training places.

Discussion

The results of this study show that Vietnamese English teachers more prefer to have face-to-face formal professional development programs compared to the online training programs. With regards to the second research question about the teachers' voices related to the implementation of online professional development programs, most of them positively perceive the virtual trainings. However, when they were asked to choose which the best mode, face-to-face programs were more preferred. These findings suggest that Vietnamese English teachers highly acknowledge teacher professional development programs as a crucial aspect of knowledge and skill enhancement, conducted in both face-to-face and online modes.

Imposing professional development activities for teachers is necessary and a must for better educational development. Choosing the better way for training, therefore, play a vital role in enhancing the effectiveness of training programs. The result of this study is similar to Adada (2007) when it reflects the same teachers' attitudes toward online and face-to-face professional development activities. Nevertheless, teachers' preferences in traditional training does not mean that they completely deny the application of online training models; teachers in Vietnam welcomes online training as

an in-time intervention for teachers' professional development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As regards for the form of professional training for teacher in Can Tho city Vietnam, answers recorded from the interviews show that there are both formal and informal programs. All forms of professional development activities classified by Drago-Severson (2002), Louie and Hargrave (2006), and Bates et al. (2016) are gradually mentioned by teachers through the interviews. Most teachers formally join in workshops, under the calls for participations of their institutions; and as a self-directed behavior, they actively get involved in groups for further discussion and mutual learning. The idea of online workshops and online training activities merely become familiar to most teachers in the time of the pandemic.

Issues related to the strengths and limitations of online training once again are confirmed via the current research. Similar to the findings of Barkley and Bianco (2002), Powell and Bodur (2019) and Parsons et al. (2019), almost teachers prefer the flexibility of online training, but oppose to the difficulties of social interaction issues. This is an interesting finding, since the participants, in one side, consider online professional development programs as flexible and comfortable. On the other side, they are more preferring face-to-face programs because of the effectiveness. This finding implies that although virtual teacher trainings could be smoothly conducted, particularly in the time of COVID-19 pandemic, there are several aspects of offline face-to-face programs that could not be replaced in by the virtual ones. This study further highlights an expectation of the English teachers in Can Tho city toward the implementation of blended professional development programs. A number of teachers in the current study reflects the fact that some training activities are actually hard to be demonstrated online. Hence, it is reasonable if they would still prefer face-to-face professional development activities.

The results of this study have several implications, particularly for the discourse of teacher professional development programs. First, considering the positive attitudes of the English teachers in Vietnam toward virtual development programs, teachers and educators are highly recommended to self-regulate their trainings using digital technology in an online mode. Virtual space is a fertile ground for accessing various course materials to enhance teachers' knowledge, understandings, and skills. Second, teacher professional program providers should consider the results of this study as valuable insights in designing training programs based on teachers' expectations and needs. Hence, there will be a synchronous development for teachers professional training programs.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore the Vietnamese English teachers' attitudes toward online professional development programs. Drawing on mix-method in sequential explanatory research, the results depict that the teachers positively acknowledge the practices of online professional development programs. However, they still prefer face-to-face programs due to the effectiveness. These results help to refect parts of English teachers' perceptions toward online professional development activities. Through this research, we discovered that teachers also has a strong expectation to take blended training modes. That is to say, in particular contexts, online training activities can help them access the training programs in ease; however, maintaining entire online training seems to be unacceptable since they still need opportunities for face-to-face workshops to exchange teaching experiences. This study contributes to providing fruitful inputs enhancement for providers of professional development programs in conducting teacher training. Due to the time and accessibility constraints, this study is limited in the number of participants. Therefore, future studies are suggested to take into account greater number of the participants to confirm and generalize the results of this study.

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