KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE

Article history:
Received 03 June 2026
Revised 06 September 2026
Accepted 08 September 2026
Initial Publish 27 October 2026
Published online 01 July 2027

Journal of Resource Management and Decision Engineering

Volume 6, Issue 4, pp 1-17



The Role of the Social and Cultural Capacities of Coastal Communities in the Sustainable Geoeconomic Development of Bushehr Province: Emphasizing Local Participation and Good Governance

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A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Zarei, B., Ahmadi, S. A., Boustani, S. (2027). The Role of the Social and Cultural Capacities of Coastal Communities in the Sustainable Geoeconomic Development of Bushehr Province: Emphasizing Local Participation and Good Governance. *Journal of Resource Management and Decision Engineering, 6*(4), 1-17.
https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jrmde.425

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A B S T R A C T

The sustainable geoeconomic development of coastal regions does not depend solely on the availability of resources and geographical location; rather, it also depends on the social and cultural capacities of local communities, stakeholder participation, and the quality of governance. The present study aimed to explain the role of the social and cultural capacities of coastal communities in the sustainable geoeconomic development of Bushehr Province, with an emphasis on local participation and good governance. The theoretical framework of the study was developed based on ecological economics theory and the triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability. Accordingly, social and cultural capacities were considered contextual factors, while local participation and good governance were regarded as mechanisms linking social capacities to developmental outcomes. In terms of purpose, the study was applied, and in terms of method, it employed a descriptive-analytical design. The indicators were initially extracted from the theoretical foundations, previous studies, and relevant documents and were subsequently refined and localized using the Delphi method and the opinions of 20 experts. A researcher-developed questionnaire was then purposively distributed among 200 managers and experts from organizations and institutions involved in maritime-oriented, economic, environmental, and planning activities in Bushehr Province. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and SmartPLS software. The results indicated that social and cultural capacities had positive and significant effects on sustainable geoeconomic development ($\beta = 0.961$), local participation ($\beta = 0.966$), and good governance ($\beta = 0.975$). Furthermore, local participation ($\beta = 0.385$) and good governance ($\beta = 0.331$) had direct and significant effects on sustainable geoeconomic development. The indirect effect of social and cultural capacities through local participation was 0.372, while the indirect effect through good governance was 0.323. The findings emphasize the central role of social and cultural capacities and the importance of participatory mechanisms and good governance in achieving sustainable geoeconomic development in Bushehr Province.

Keywords: *maritime-oriented geoeconomics, social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, sustainable development, Bushehr Province.*

1. Introduction

Coastal regions have increasingly become strategic arenas in which economic development, geopolitical positioning, environmental sustainability, social resilience, and cultural continuity intersect. The growing importance of maritime trade, port-based logistics, fisheries, marine tourism, offshore industries, and coastal infrastructure has transformed coastal zones into major nodes of national and regional development. Within this context, the concept of a sea-oriented or blue economy has emerged as a framework for promoting economic growth through the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources while simultaneously protecting ecological systems and strengthening the welfare of coastal communities. International development agendas increasingly emphasize sustainable ocean-based economies as essential components of resilient national economies, particularly in countries with extensive coastlines and access to major maritime corridors (United, 2021). The Sustainable Development Goals have further reinforced the need to integrate economic, social, and environmental priorities within long-term development planning, emphasizing that sustainable development requires coordinated institutional action, inclusive participation, and equitable resource use (Sachs et al., 2022). From this perspective, coastal development cannot be reduced to physical infrastructure or resource exploitation; rather, it requires a multidimensional approach in which economic productivity, ecological integrity, institutional quality, and community well-being are pursued simultaneously.

The economic significance of coastal and marine spaces has led to increasing attention to the concept of geoeconomics, which concerns the strategic use of geography, resources, transportation routes, economic networks, and spatial advantages to strengthen economic power and development capacity. Coastal geoeconomics is particularly important because maritime territories connect domestic production systems to international trade networks, create opportunities for investment and employment, and enhance the strategic position of coastal regions within national and transnational economic systems. Evidence suggests that a sustainable ocean economy can generate measurable contributions to national economic performance when marine resources are managed efficiently and embedded in broader development strategies (Nguyen, 2024). Similarly, blue-economy factors such as marine industries, maritime trade, coastal infrastructure, fisheries, and ocean-related investment can positively contribute to sustainable economic growth when institutional and environmental conditions are supportive (Ahammed et al., 2024). In the Iranian context, the sea-oriented economy has increasingly been regarded as a major but underutilized component of national economic development, with considerable potential for strengthening production, employment, trade, and territorial integration (Iraj, 2024). National strategic assessments have likewise identified sea-oriented development and the marine economy as indispensable for creating a dynamic and resilient national economy (Strategic Research Center of the Islamic Consultative, 2021).

Iran possesses a distinctive geoeconomic position because of its access to the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and important international maritime corridors. However, the existence of geographical advantages does not automatically translate into sustainable development outcomes. Studies of Iranian coastal regions have repeatedly shown that institutional fragmentation, inadequate policy implementation, infrastructural limitations, and weak integration between coastal communities and formal development processes can constrain the realization of maritime potential. Research on the geopolitics of maritime transportation has demonstrated that coastal corridors and port systems can significantly influence Iran's political economy, especially when they are connected to larger regional transportation and trade networks (Afshin Motaghi et al., 2024). The geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of ports and communication corridors has also been highlighted in analyses of Chabahar and Gwadar, where maritime infrastructure is closely linked to broader Eurasian economic competition (Hadi, 2021). Nevertheless, the historical development of Iran's southern coasts has faced structural and geostrategic barriers that have limited the effective utilization of these maritime advantages (Hamidreza et al., 2022). Similar analyses of the Persian Gulf and Makran regions have emphasized that external pressures and systemic constraints continue to shape the trajectory of sea-oriented development (Amir Nezam & Hamidreza, 2024).

A major challenge in coastal development planning is the assumption that investment in ports, transportation, tourism, and maritime industries is sufficient to produce sustainable geoeconomic development. In practice, development outcomes are strongly influenced by the social and cultural capacities of the communities in which economic interventions take place. Coastal communities are not passive recipients of development policies; they possess

locally embedded knowledge, social relationships, livelihood systems, cultural identities, and collective experiences that can either facilitate or constrain the sustainability of development programs. Social dimensions such as trust, cooperation, collective action, community identity, and local knowledge are therefore fundamental components of coastal development (Achmad, 2022). Recent research on socio-ecological resilience has further demonstrated that local capacity, environmental behavior, and population dynamics interact in shaping the ability of coastal communities to adapt to environmental and economic pressures (Rizkiyah, 2026). The resilience of coastal communities is also closely linked to socioeconomic conditions and to their ability to access development opportunities, particularly among groups located at the social and economic margins (Ihdayatul et al., 2026). Accordingly, social and cultural capacities should be regarded as productive development assets rather than peripheral social variables.

The concept of social capital is especially relevant in this regard. Social capital encompasses trust, networks, norms of reciprocity, collective cooperation, and the capacity of individuals and groups to coordinate action for shared objectives. In coastal regions, social capital can influence community participation in resource management, local entrepreneurship, tourism development, environmental protection, and interactions with public institutions. Spatial assessments of social capital in Bandar Bushehr indicate that social capital is unevenly distributed across coastal urban spaces and that such differences may affect the capacity of neighborhoods and communities to participate in development processes (Valiollah et al., 2024). Social capital is also closely connected with local resilience because communities characterized by stronger internal trust, cooperation, and collective organization are generally better positioned to respond to social, environmental, and economic change. At the same time, the social consequences of sea-oriented development must be considered carefully, because large-scale economic transformation may generate uneven benefits, demographic change, shifts in occupational structures, and new forms of social inequality if local communities are not meaningfully incorporated into planning and decision-making (Yaghoub & Maryam, 2025).

Cultural capacity represents another important but often overlooked dimension of sustainable coastal development. Maritime cultures are formed through historical relationships between communities and the sea, including traditional livelihoods, fishing practices, navigation knowledge, local customs, environmental knowledge, collective memories, and place-based identities. These cultural resources can strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of development policies when they are recognized in planning processes. Cultural ecosystem services in coastal zones function as an important bridge between natural ecosystems and social systems, demonstrating that the value of coastal environments extends beyond economic production to include identity, heritage, recreation, social cohesion, and cultural meaning (Zhao et al., 2024). Cultural mapping has similarly been proposed as a useful approach for understanding how coastal landscapes acquire social and cultural significance and for integrating local cultural values into sustainability strategies (Oliveira et al., 2025). Sustainable coastal development therefore requires sensitivity to the cultural characteristics of local communities rather than the imposition of standardized development models that disregard place-specific traditions, identities, and knowledge systems.

The interaction between local communities and coastal ecosystems further reinforces the need for an integrated social-ecological perspective. Marine and coastal ecosystems are complex systems in which ecological processes, economic activities, institutional arrangements, and community practices are deeply interconnected. Studies of coastal reef ecosystems have shown that environmental sustainability depends on multiple interacting biotic and abiotic factors, highlighting the ecological complexity within which coastal development occurs (Massei et al., 2023). Research on the evolution of blue-green spaces in rapidly developing urban areas has likewise emphasized the importance of spatial planning and ecological structure in shaping sustainable development outcomes (Niu et al., 2023). In coastal economies, the relationship between ecological sustainability and livelihood systems is especially important because many local households depend directly or indirectly on marine resources. Social-ecological analyses of seafood sustainability schemes have shown that environmental governance cannot be separated from the social structures, institutions, and stakeholder relationships that influence resource use (Elegbede et al., 2023). Consequently, sustainable geoeconomic development requires a balance between economic utilization of coastal resources and long-term protection of the ecological systems upon which local livelihoods and future development depend.

Local participation constitutes one of the most important mechanisms for converting social and cultural capacities

into sustainable development outcomes. Participation refers not only to consultation but also to the meaningful involvement of local actors in decision-making, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Interactive governance models increasingly emphasize that citizen participation should be embedded within local government processes rather than treated as an occasional or symbolic activity (Jäntti et al., 2023). In coastal sustainability planning, participatory approaches can improve the quality of development goals and indicators by incorporating local priorities, experiential knowledge, and stakeholder perspectives (Engen et al., 2024). The co-creation of sustainability objectives is particularly important in coastal regions because different stakeholders—including public agencies, local residents, environmental groups, businesses, and resource users—often hold competing interests and different understandings of development. Meaningful participation can therefore improve legitimacy, reduce conflict, enhance accountability, and increase community commitment to implementation.

The importance of local participation is particularly evident in Bushehr Province, where coastal communities interact closely with maritime economic activities, fisheries, port functions, energy industries, tourism, and environmental resources. Studies have shown that interaction between the Bushehr Province Coast Guard and local communities contributes to maritime border security, demonstrating the broader institutional value of cooperation between governmental bodies and coastal residents (Hamid, 2023). Community-based tourism also represents an important pathway through which local participation can connect cultural resources, livelihood development, and coastal sustainability. Research in coastal-peri-urban settlements of Bushehr has indicated that community-based tourism can contribute to local development when local actors participate in the use and management of coastal attractions (Fatemeh et al., 2022). Likewise, strategies for enhancing the tourism capacity of Bushehr City have emphasized the need to strengthen local infrastructure, destination management, and the effective use of coastal tourism potential (Mohammadreza & Ehsan, 2022). More recent evidence suggests that the sustainable development of tourism in Bushehr's coastal areas is closely associated with social resilience, indicating that the capacity of local communities to adapt, cooperate, and maintain social cohesion is an essential precondition for tourism sustainability (Iraj et al., 2025).

Coastal and marine tourism can also contribute to socioeconomic sustainability in other Iranian coastal regions, particularly when development is connected to local livelihoods and community resources. Evidence from Chabahar shows that coastal and marine tourism may support rural socioeconomic sustainability through employment generation, income diversification, and the development of locally based services (Irandagani et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the economic benefits of tourism and other maritime activities may remain limited when they are disconnected from local capacities or when development is highly centralized. The broader experience of Makran illustrates this problem. Studies examining upstream documents and policies have identified significant gaps between strategic sea-oriented development objectives and implementation outcomes (Amir Nezam et al., 2023). These gaps suggest that the existence of policy documents alone is insufficient; successful implementation depends on coordination among institutions, the inclusion of local stakeholders, appropriate resource allocation, and mechanisms that align national development objectives with local conditions.

This requirement brings the concept of good governance to the center of sustainable geoeconomic development. Good governance generally encompasses transparency, accountability, effectiveness, institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, rule of law, and fairness in decision-making. In the context of the blue economy, governance determines how resources are allocated, how conflicts are managed, how environmental standards are enforced, and how development benefits are distributed among stakeholders. The experience of small island states demonstrates that good governance is essential for balancing economic ambitions with ecological protection and social inclusion in sustainable blue-economy strategies (Benzaken et al., 2022). More broadly, governance quality has important implications for economic development because effective institutions reduce uncertainty, improve public-sector performance, and create more favorable conditions for investment and growth (Maiti et al., 2024). Public governance is also closely associated with transparency and corruption control, suggesting that institutional quality affects not only administrative performance but also public trust and the legitimacy of development policies (Koeswayo et al., 2024).

In geographically sensitive coastal regions, good governance requires coordination across multiple administrative levels and sectors. Maritime development

typically involves ministries, provincial authorities, municipalities, port organizations, environmental agencies, tourism institutions, private investors, local communities, and civil society actors. Without institutional coordination, overlapping responsibilities and fragmented decision-making can undermine the efficiency of development programs. This is particularly relevant in Bushehr Province, where population distribution, urban development, industrial concentration, and coastal economic activities create complex spatial planning challenges. Research on population spatial planning in Bushehr has emphasized the importance of aligning demographic distribution and settlement patterns with the province's development capacities and spatial characteristics (Mehdi, 2024). Such findings indicate that sustainable geoeconomic development requires integrated territorial governance capable of coordinating population, infrastructure, economic activity, environmental constraints, and community needs.

Spatial justice is another important dimension of good governance in coastal development. Large maritime projects may generate substantial economic value while distributing social and environmental costs unevenly across communities. Sustainable development therefore requires attention to who benefits from investment, who bears environmental risks, and whether coastal residents have equitable access to employment, infrastructure, services, and decision-making. Integrating social justice and environmental sustainability into blue-economy initiatives has been emphasized as a necessary corrective to development models that prioritize aggregate economic growth without sufficient attention to distributional consequences (Sowman & Sunde, 2024). This perspective is highly relevant to Bushehr Province because the expansion of energy industries, port infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, and maritime trade can produce both opportunities and pressures for local communities. Sustainable geoeconomic development should therefore be evaluated not only by the volume of investment or output but also by its capacity to generate inclusive livelihoods, protect ecosystems, preserve cultural resources, and distribute development benefits fairly.

The strategic development of the sea-oriented economy also requires a policy framework that links national priorities with local implementation mechanisms. Research on strategies for developing Iran's sea-oriented economy has emphasized the need to strengthen maritime industries, infrastructure, investment, and institutional support in accordance with national economic resilience objectives (Mohammad-Ali Matlabi & Ali Zare, 2022). However, translating these strategic priorities into sustainable regional outcomes requires attention to the social foundations of economic activity. A development model that focuses primarily on ports, trade corridors, or industrial investment while neglecting community capacity, local participation, and governance quality may increase economic activity without achieving genuine sustainability. Conversely, when social capital, maritime culture, indigenous knowledge, participatory planning, transparency, accountability, and institutional coordination are integrated into development processes, coastal communities can become active partners in geoeconomic transformation rather than marginal beneficiaries of externally designed projects.

Accordingly, Bushehr Province provides an important setting for examining how social and cultural capacities, local participation, and good governance interact in shaping sustainable geoeconomic development. The province possesses significant maritime assets, including strategic access to the Persian Gulf, port infrastructure, fisheries, tourism resources, energy-related activities, and long-established coastal communities. At the same time, its development trajectory is influenced by spatial inequalities, environmental pressures, governance complexity, institutional coordination challenges, and the need to ensure that local communities participate meaningfully in economic transformation. Existing research has contributed valuable insights into maritime transport, tourism capacity, spatial planning, social capital, sea-oriented policies, and local community relations; however, these dimensions have often been examined separately rather than within an integrated explanatory framework. A more comprehensive perspective is therefore needed to explain how the social and cultural capacities of coastal communities influence geoeconomic development directly and how this relationship may be strengthened through participatory and governance mechanisms.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to explain the role of the social and cultural capacities of coastal communities in the sustainable geoeconomic development of Bushehr Province, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of local participation and good governance.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-analytical in terms of methodology. The required data were collected from library sources, official documents

and reports, and relevant studies. Through descriptive and comparative analyses, the maritime-oriented geoeconomic capacities and challenges of Bushehr Province, as well as the requirements of good governance for achieving sustainable development, were examined. The expert population of the study consisted of managers and experts from relevant executive organizations, university specialists, economic actors in the maritime sector, and representatives of local coastal communities in Bushehr Province. Experts were selected purposively based on their expertise, relevant academic or executive experience, familiarity with the conditions of Bushehr Province, and willingness to participate in the Delphi rounds. Given the nature of the Delphi method, the number of panel members was determined based on adequate expertise and the achievement of an appropriate level of consensus, and approximately 20 individuals were selected for the expert panel. The diversity of panel members across four executive, academic, economic, and social groups made it possible to examine the subject from multiple perspectives. Considering the four groups specified for the Delphi component, the panel composition could be arranged in a balanced and purposive manner, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Expected Characteristics of the Expert Panel Members

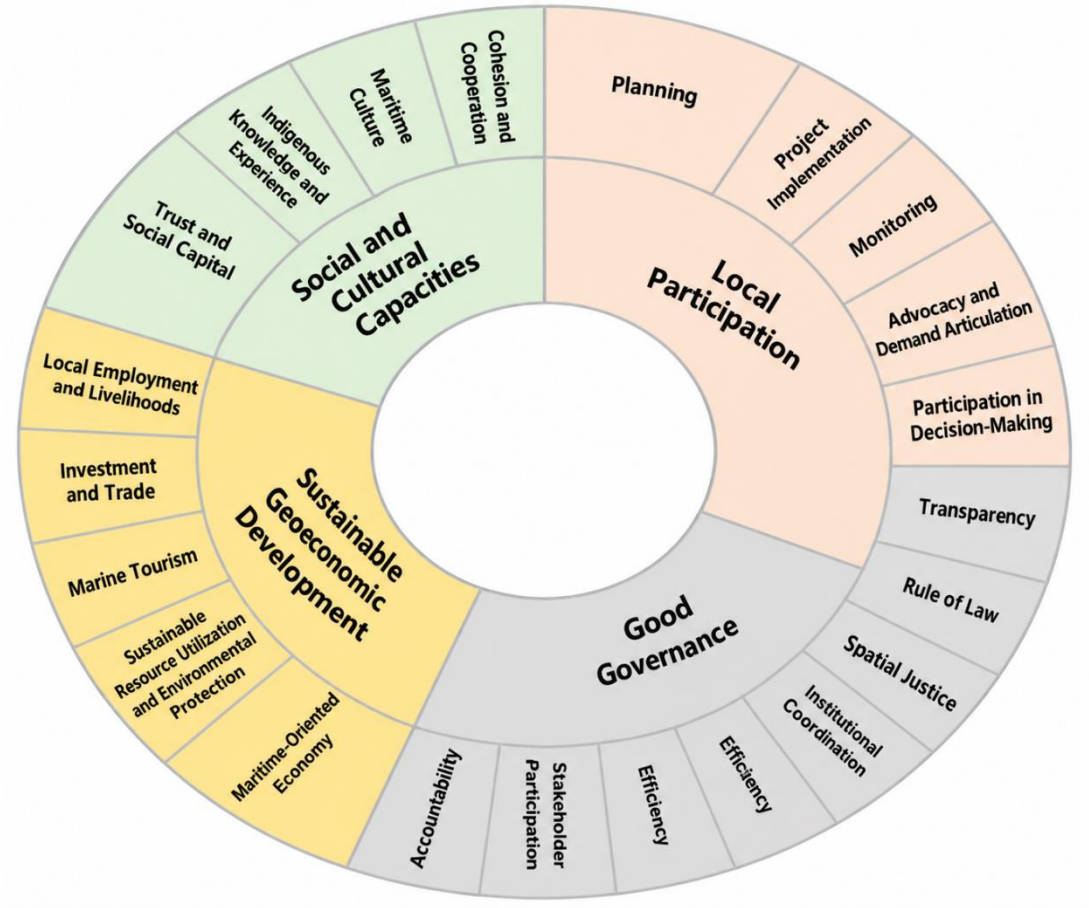
Group	Proposed Number	Share of Panel
Managers and experts from executive organizations	6	30%
University specialists and researchers	6	30%
Economic actors and maritime industry professionals	4	20%
Representatives of local communities and social stakeholders	4	20%

This composition ensures that the Delphi findings do not merely reflect the perspectives of a single sector and that three levels of knowledge—theoretical knowledge, executive experience, and field and social experience—are represented in the consensus-building process.

The statistical population of the questionnaire-based phase of the study consisted of managers and experts from organizations and institutions involved in maritime-oriented, economic, environmental, and planning activities in Bushehr Province. Given the specialized nature of the study, 200 individuals were selected through purposive sampling, and the questionnaire was distributed among them. Data collection was conducted in two sections: library-documentary and field-based. In the library-documentary section, the theoretical foundations, research background, and domestic and international articles and studies related to maritime-oriented geoeconomics, good governance, and sustainable development were reviewed. In addition, upstream policy documents and official reports, including the General Policies for Maritime-Oriented Development, the Seventh Development Plan, spatial planning documents, and reports issued by organizations related to ports, fisheries, the environment, and the development of Bushehr Province, were used to identify capacities and extract the initial indicators. In the field-based section, the extracted indicators were initially reviewed, refined, and localized by experts using the Delphi method. The experts assessed the importance, relevance, and applicability of the indicators and provided recommendations for modification. In subsequent rounds, inappropriate indicators were removed, similar indicators were merged, and newly proposed indicators were added until a localized and consensually agreed set of indicators was obtained. Based on the results, the conceptual model of the study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Study



The confirmed indicators were then incorporated into a researcher-developed questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale and distributed among the study population. The final questionnaire covered four main constructs: social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development. The researcher-developed questionnaire was prepared, and its content validity was assessed based on the opinions of specialists in geoeconomics, political geography, coastal development, and governance. Construct validity and instrument reliability were subsequently evaluated during the measurement model assessment. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to assess reliability, while average variance extracted (AVE) and the Fornell–Larcker criterion were used to assess convergent and discriminant validity, respectively. The research process was systematically conducted through several stages: reviewing the theoretical foundations and research background related to maritime-oriented geoeconomics, good governance, and sustainable development; examining official documents and reports and identifying the capacities, challenges, and requirements of maritime-oriented development in Bushehr Province; extracting the initial indicators and developing the conceptual framework of the study; forming the expert panel and implementing the Delphi method to refine, modify, and localize the indicators; developing the final researcher-developed questionnaire based on the confirmed indicators; collecting field data from the study population; analyzing the data and testing the research model using partial least squares structural equation modeling; interpreting the findings; and presenting a proposed model of sustainable development based on maritime-oriented geoeconomics and good governance in Bushehr Province. Following their extraction from the theoretical foundations and documents and their confirmation through the Delphi process, the research indicators were organized into four main constructs.

Table 2

Main Indicators of the Research Variables

Construct	Main Indicators
Social and cultural capacities	Trust and social capital; cohesion and cooperation; maritime culture; indigenous knowledge and experience
Local participation	Participation in decision-making; planning; project implementation; monitoring; advocacy and demand articulation
Good governance	Transparency; accountability; stakeholder participation; efficiency; institutional coordination; spatial justice; rule of law
Sustainable geoeconomic development	Maritime-oriented economy; local employment and livelihoods; investment and trade; marine tourism; sustainable resource utilization and environmental protection

Data analysis was conducted at two levels. Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to describe the respondents' characteristics and the status of the research variables.

In the inferential statistics section, structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationships among the research variables and test the conceptual model. This method enables the simultaneous assessment of the relationships among social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development. At this stage, the direct effects and, where specified in the model, the indirect effects of the variables were examined, and model fit indices and path coefficients were used to evaluate the model.

3. Findings and Results

To analyze the research data, descriptive statistical indices, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were first calculated. Subsequently, to assess the quality of the measurement instrument and test the conceptual model of the study, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted using SmartPLS software. Data analysis was performed in two stages. In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated by examining construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. In the second stage, the structural model was assessed using path coefficients, the coefficient of determination (R^2), direct and indirect effects, and bootstrapping. To determine the statistical significance of the relationships, a t statistic greater than 1.96 and a significance level below .05 were adopted as the decision criteria. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented first, followed by the descriptive statistics of the research variables.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Respondent Characteristic	Frequency, *n* (%)
Number of respondents	200
Age	
Under 30 years	28 (14.0%)
31–40 years	31 (15.5%)
41–50 years	77 (38.5%)
51 years and older	64 (32.0%)
Gender	
Men	137 (68.5%)
Women	63 (31.5%)
Educational level	
Bachelor's degree	21 (10.5%)
Master's degree	76 (38.0%)
Doctoral degree	103 (51.5%)
Years of service	
Less than 10 years	41 (20.5%)
11–20 years	93 (46.5%)
21–30 years	66 (33.0%)
Organizational position	
Manager	86 (43.0%)

Expert	78 (39.0%)
Other	36 (18.0%)
Field of activity	
Economic and maritime	58 (29.0%)
Environmental	46 (23.0%)
Planning and development	51 (25.5%)
Executive and managerial	45 (22.5%)

According to the results presented in Table 3, of the 200 respondents, 137 (68.5%) were men and 63 (31.5%) were women. In terms of age, the largest group consisted of respondents aged 41–50 years, with 77 individuals (38.5%), followed by those aged 51 years and older, with 64 individuals (32.0%). Regarding educational attainment, respondents with doctoral degrees constituted the largest proportion, with 103 individuals (51.5%), followed by those with master's degrees, with 76 individuals (38.0%). In terms of years of service, the highest frequency was observed among respondents with 11–20 years of experience, comprising 93 individuals (46.5%). Among the respondents, 86 (43.0%) were managers, 78 (39.0%) were experts, and 36 (18.0%) held other organizational positions. Regarding the field of activity, the economic and maritime sector accounted for the largest proportion, with 58 respondents (29.0%). The descriptive statistics of the research variables are presented below.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Research Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social and cultural capacities	3.50	0.873	1.08	5.00
Sustainable geoeconomic development	3.46	0.678	2.00	4.80
Local participation	3.54	0.831	1.13	5.00
Good governance	3.49	0.843	1.29	4.95

According to the results presented in Table 4, local participation had the highest mean among the research variables, with a value of 3.54. This was followed by social and cultural capacities with a mean of 3.50 and good governance with a mean of 3.49. Sustainable geoeconomic development had the lowest mean among the four research constructs, with a value of 3.46. Overall, the means of all variables were above the midpoint of the five-point scale, indicating that respondents provided relatively favorable assessments of the status of social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development in Bushehr Province. Subsequently, prior to conducting inferential analyses, the normality of the data distribution was examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The results indicated that the significance levels for the research variables were below .05; therefore, the assumption of normality was rejected. Given the non-normal distribution of the data, the sample size of 200, and the nature of the research model, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS software was considered appropriate. The measurement and structural models were subsequently evaluated. In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed by examining the factor loadings of the items. The results indicated that the factor loadings of all items ranged from 0.714 to 0.883, and their corresponding t statistics exceeded 1.96. Therefore, all items demonstrated adequate and statistically significant factor loadings and were retained for subsequent analyses. This finding confirms the adequacy of the indicators used to measure the constructs of social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess construct reliability. Convergent validity was examined using average variance extracted (AVE). In addition, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was used to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Research Variable	Social and Cultural Capacities	Sustainable Geoeconomic Development	Local Participation	Good Governance	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social and cultural capacities	0.832	—	—	—	0.959	0.964	0.692
Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.961	0.719	—	—	0.894	0.915	0.517
Local participation	0.966	0.965	0.830	—	0.968	0.971	0.689
Good governance	0.975	0.966	0.975	0.823	0.976	0.978	

According to the results presented in Table 5, Cronbach's alpha values for the constructs ranged from 0.894 to 0.976, while composite reliability values ranged from 0.915 to 0.978, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Therefore, the reliability of the research constructs was considered satisfactory. The average variance extracted values ranged from 0.517 to 0.692, all exceeding the threshold of 0.50; therefore, the convergent validity of the constructs was also confirmed. In addition, the square root of the average variance extracted on the main diagonal of the matrix for each construct was greater than the correlations between that construct and the other constructs. Accordingly, the constructs of social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development demonstrated acceptable conceptual distinctiveness and discriminant validity.

Following confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated using path coefficients, *t* statistics, the coefficient of determination (R^2), and the predictive relevance index (Q^2). Bootstrapping was used to assess the significance of the structural relationships, and a *t* statistic greater than 1.96 at the 95% confidence level was adopted as the criterion for confirming the relationships. The coefficient of determination results showed that the model had high explanatory power for the endogenous constructs. The R^2 values were 0.947 for sustainable geoeconomic development, 0.933 for local participation, and 0.950 for good governance, indicating the model's substantial explanatory power in predicting the endogenous constructs. Furthermore, the positive Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs confirmed the model's satisfactory predictive relevance. Finally, the goodness-of-fit (GoF) index was calculated as 0.551 to evaluate the overall fit of the model. Overall, the findings indicate that the structural model possesses acceptable explanatory and predictive capabilities. Subsequently, the direct and indirect relationships among social and cultural capacities, local participation, good governance, and sustainable geoeconomic development were examined using path coefficients and *t* statistics. The results of testing the relationships among the research variables are presented below.

Table 6

Results of Testing the Research Relationships

Path	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	t Statistic	Result
Social and cultural capacities → Local participation → Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.372	0.080	4.655	Supported
Social and cultural capacities → Good governance → Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.323	0.086	3.733	Supported
Social and cultural capacities → Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.961	0.005	5.565	Supported
Social and cultural capacities → Local participation	0.966	0.005	3.556	Supported
Social and cultural capacities → Good governance	0.975	0.003	2.644	Supported
Local participation → Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.385	0.083	4.652	Supported
Good governance → Sustainable geoeconomic development	0.331	0.089	3.733	Supported

According to the results presented in Table 6, all examined relationships were positive and statistically significant at the 95% confidence level because the t statistic exceeded 1.96 for all paths. Furthermore, social and cultural

capacities had direct and significant effects on sustainable geoeconomic development (0.961), local participation (0.966), and good governance (0.975). In addition, local participation and good governance had direct, positive, and significant effects on sustainable geoeconomic development. The results for the indirect relationships also indicated that local participation (0.372) and good governance (0.323) played mediating roles in transmitting the effects of social and cultural capacities to sustainable geoeconomic development. Therefore, the findings support the central role of social and cultural capacities and the importance of local participation and good governance in achieving sustainable geoeconomic development in Bushehr Province.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the role of the social and cultural capacities of coastal communities in the sustainable geoeconomic development of Bushehr Province, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of local participation and good governance. The findings showed that social and cultural capacities had a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on sustainable geoeconomic development ($\beta = 0.961$). Social and cultural capacities also had significant positive effects on local participation ($\beta = 0.966$) and good governance ($\beta = 0.975$). In addition, local participation ($\beta = 0.385$) and good governance ($\beta = 0.331$) exerted positive and significant direct effects on sustainable geoeconomic development. The indirect effects further demonstrated that social and cultural capacities influenced sustainable geoeconomic development through both local participation ($\beta = 0.372$) and good governance ($\beta = 0.323$). The high coefficients of determination for sustainable geoeconomic development ($R^2 = 0.947$), local participation ($R^2 = 0.933$), and good governance ($R^2 = 0.950$) also indicated that the proposed model possessed substantial explanatory power. Taken together, the results suggest that the geoeconomic development of Bushehr Province cannot be understood solely in terms of physical infrastructure, geographical position, marine resources, or investment flows; rather, it is deeply rooted in the social organization, cultural capacities, participatory structures, and governance quality of coastal communities.

The strong direct effect of social and cultural capacities on sustainable geoeconomic development indicates that trust, social capital, cohesion, cooperation, maritime culture, and indigenous knowledge constitute fundamental development resources. This finding is consistent with the argument that coastal communities possess social assets that directly shape the sustainability of local development initiatives (Achmad, 2022). Social capital can facilitate collective action, reduce transaction costs, strengthen cooperation among economic actors, and increase the willingness of residents to engage in community-based projects. In the context of Bushehr Province, where local livelihoods, maritime occupations, port activities, tourism, fisheries, and environmental resources are closely interconnected, such capacities can improve the effectiveness of development programs by linking formal economic strategies with community knowledge and local networks. This interpretation is also supported by research showing that socio-ecological resilience in coastal communities is shaped by the interaction of local capacity, population dynamics, and environmental behavior (Rizkiyah, 2026). Similarly, socioeconomic resilience in coastal communities depends on the capacity of local populations to mobilize resources, adapt to change, and maintain functional social relations under development pressures (Ihdayatul et al., 2026).

The importance of social capital identified in the present study is particularly relevant to the spatial and social context of Bushehr. Previous research on the spatial distribution of social capital in Bandar Bushehr has shown that social capital varies across different urban and coastal areas, suggesting that access to trust-based networks, cooperation, and collective capacities is not evenly distributed (Valiollah et al., 2024). Such spatial inequalities can affect the ability of different communities to benefit from maritime-oriented economic opportunities. Areas with stronger social cohesion may be better positioned to organize local businesses, participate in tourism development, cooperate with public institutions, and manage shared resources. Conversely, communities with weaker social capital may remain less capable of influencing decision-making processes or capturing the benefits generated by coastal development. Therefore, the significant relationship found in the present study supports the view that strengthening social capital should be considered an integral component of geoeconomic policy rather than merely a secondary social objective.

The role of cultural capacities is equally important. The positive influence of social and cultural capacities on sustainable geoeconomic development implies that maritime culture, local identity, indigenous experience, and place-based knowledge contribute to the sustainability of coastal

development. Coastal cultural ecosystem services connect ecological environments to collective identity, social meaning, and cultural practices, thereby creating an important bridge between natural and social systems (Zhao et al., 2024). In a similar vein, cultural mapping has been introduced as an effective approach for recognizing the cultural dimensions of coastal landscapes and incorporating them into sustainability planning (Oliveira et al., 2025). These perspectives support the present finding by demonstrating that coastal development is more sustainable when it builds upon local cultural resources rather than replacing or marginalizing them. In Bushehr, traditional maritime knowledge, fishing practices, historical connections to the Persian Gulf, local occupational identities, and culturally embedded coastal livelihoods can serve as valuable assets for tourism, environmental stewardship, community entrepreneurship, and locally grounded development.

The finding that social and cultural capacities strongly predicted local participation also deserves particular attention. The path coefficient between social and cultural capacities and local participation was very high (β = 0.966), indicating that participation is strongly dependent on the existence of trust, cohesion, community networks, local knowledge, and shared cultural identity. Participation is rarely generated merely through administrative invitations or formal consultation procedures. Rather, people are more likely to participate when they possess strong community ties, perceive collective efficacy, and believe that their experiences and knowledge are recognized. This result is consistent with interactive governance research showing that effective citizen participation requires participation to be embedded within institutional and local governance processes rather than treated as a temporary or symbolic mechanism (Jäntti et al., 2023). It also aligns with studies emphasizing co-creation in coastal sustainability, where stakeholder involvement improves the relevance and legitimacy of sustainability goals and indicators (Engen et al., 2024).

The positive relationship between local participation and sustainable geoeconomic development (β = 0.385) further shows that participation functions as an operational mechanism through which social resources are translated into development outcomes. Participation in planning, project implementation, monitoring, advocacy, and decision-making can improve the alignment of development programs with actual local needs and can reduce the risk of top-down policy failure. This is especially important in maritime-oriented development, where projects may produce both economic opportunities and social or environmental pressures. The finding is consistent with evidence from Bushehr showing that interaction between local communities and formal institutions contributes to improved maritime border management and security (Hamid, 2023). It is also supported by studies on community-based tourism in Bushehr, which have shown that local involvement can strengthen coastal settlement development and create more locally embedded economic benefits (Fatemeh et al., 2022). Similarly, research on coastal tourism development in Bushehr has emphasized the importance of local and institutional capacities in realizing tourism potential (Mohammadreza & Ehsan, 2022).

The mediating effect of local participation (β = 0.372) indicates that part of the influence of social and cultural capacities on sustainable geoeconomic development occurs through participatory processes. This suggests that social capital and cultural resources alone are not sufficient unless they are converted into actual participation in governance and development activities. In other words, trust, cohesion, and local knowledge become economically consequential when they enable residents and stakeholders to enter planning processes, influence decisions, collaborate in projects, and monitor outcomes. This interpretation is compatible with findings that social resilience plays an important role in sustainable tourism development in Bushehr's coastal areas (Iraj et al., 2025). It also corresponds with evidence from Chabahar showing that coastal and marine tourism contributes more effectively to socioeconomic sustainability when local communities are meaningfully integrated into development processes (Irandagani et al., 2025). Thus, local participation appears to be a key mechanism through which latent social capacity is transformed into observable geoeconomic value.

The very strong effect of social and cultural capacities on good governance (β = 0.975) indicates that governance quality is also shaped by the social environment in which institutions operate. Good governance is often conceptualized in terms of formal administrative principles such as transparency, accountability, efficiency, stakeholder participation, institutional coordination, spatial justice, and rule of law. However, the present results suggest that the social foundations of governance are equally significant. Institutions are more likely to function effectively where trust exists between citizens and authorities, where local stakeholders are organized, and where there is a culture of cooperation and public engagement. This interpretation is

consistent with research demonstrating that governance quality is linked to transparency and lower perceptions of corruption (Koeswayo et al., 2024). It is also compatible with broader evidence showing that good governance supports economic growth by improving institutional effectiveness and reducing uncertainty (Maiti et al., 2024).

The positive direct effect of good governance on sustainable geoeconomic development (β = 0.331) reinforces the importance of institutional quality in coastal development. Maritime-oriented development requires coordination among multiple agencies and stakeholders, including port authorities, environmental organizations, local governments, economic actors, tourism institutions, fisheries bodies, investors, and coastal communities. Without transparency, accountability, institutional coordination, and regulatory consistency, the potential advantages of a strategic maritime location may not be effectively converted into sustainable economic outcomes. The present finding is strongly supported by the experience of sustainable blue-economy governance, where good governance has been identified as a critical condition for balancing economic development, ecological protection, and social inclusion (Benzaken et al., 2022). The result also resonates with international policy perspectives emphasizing that sustainable ocean-based economies require governance systems capable of integrating environmental, social, and economic priorities (United, 2021).

The mediating effect of good governance (β = 0.323) further indicates that social and cultural capacities affect geoeconomic development partly by improving governance processes. This result suggests that communities with stronger social cohesion, higher trust, and better-established networks may be better able to demand accountability, participate in institutions, improve policy responsiveness, and foster interorganizational coordination. Consequently, governance becomes a channel through which local capacities contribute to more effective development outcomes. This interpretation is particularly relevant to Iran's coastal regions, where studies have identified institutional, structural, and implementation barriers to sea-oriented development (Amir Nezam et al., 2023). Previous research has also shown that external and systemic factors have constrained sea-oriented development in the Persian Gulf and Makran regions (Amir Nezam & Hamidreza, 2024). These findings imply that improving governance structures is necessary for translating maritime potential into sustained regional development.

The results should also be interpreted in light of the broader geoeconomic importance of maritime development. Bushehr Province possesses substantial strategic advantages due to its location along the Persian Gulf and its access to maritime trade, energy infrastructure, fisheries, coastal tourism, and port-based activities. Previous research has highlighted the role of maritime transport and coastal corridors in strengthening Iran's political economy (Afshin Motaghi et al., 2024). Similarly, studies of regional port competition and Eurasian connectivity have shown that maritime corridors can shape broader geoeconomic power relations (Hadi, 2021). However, the present findings add an important social and institutional dimension to these geoeconomic analyses: location and connectivity alone are not sufficient. Historical evidence shows that the development of Iran's southern coastal regions has faced persistent structural barriers despite their geostrategic advantages (Hamidreza et al., 2022). Therefore, maritime opportunities require social capacity, institutional coordination, and participatory governance to become development outcomes.

The findings also support the broader proposition that a sustainable ocean economy contributes to economic growth when its components are managed in an integrated manner. Empirical evidence has shown that sustainable ocean-economy activities can positively influence national economic performance (Nguyen, 2024), while blue-economy factors can contribute to sustainable growth when environmental and institutional conditions are supportive (Ahammed et al., 2024). In the Iranian context, the development of a sea-oriented economy has been identified as an important national economic priority (Iraj, 2024), and policy-oriented research has similarly emphasized the necessity of expanding maritime economic activities as part of a resilient national development strategy (Strategic Research Center of the Islamic Consultative, 2021). Strategies for strengthening the sea-oriented economy have also stressed the importance of investment, infrastructure, production, and institutional support (Mohammad-Ali Matlabi & Ali Zare, 2022). The present study extends these arguments by showing that such strategies should also include the strengthening of local social and cultural capacities.

Environmental sustainability represents another dimension through which the findings can be interpreted. Sustainable geoeconomic development in coastal areas must preserve marine and coastal ecosystems because these ecosystems provide the resource base for fisheries, tourism,

livelihoods, and ecosystem services. Research on complex coastal reef systems has emphasized the sensitivity of coastal environments to interacting ecological pressures (Massei et al., 2023). Studies of blue-green spatial systems likewise demonstrate that land use, urbanization, and ecological planning influence long-term sustainability (Niu et al., 2023). In addition, social-ecological analyses of seafood sustainability schemes have shown that successful resource governance requires attention to both ecological systems and stakeholder relationships (Elegbede et al., 2023). The present study therefore supports an integrated model in which environmental sustainability is not separated from social capacity and governance quality but is embedded within the broader structure of sustainable geoeconomic development.

The emphasis on local participation and good governance also has implications for social justice. Blue-economy initiatives may create economic growth while simultaneously producing unequal access to resources, employment, decision-making, and environmental benefits. For this reason, social justice must be integrated into maritime development strategies (Sowman & Sunde, 2024). This is particularly important in Bushehr Province, where major economic activities may coexist with local communities whose livelihoods and cultural practices are directly affected by coastal development. The significant role of governance in the present model implies that spatial justice, accountability, and stakeholder participation are essential for preventing development from becoming concentrated among a limited number of institutions or economic actors. Likewise, the strong role of social and cultural capacities suggests that socially inclusive development requires recognition of local communities as active economic and political stakeholders.

The findings also relate closely to spatial planning in Bushehr Province. Sustainable geoeconomic development requires coordination between population distribution, settlement systems, infrastructure, employment opportunities, environmental capacities, and economic activities. Previous research has emphasized the importance of population spatial planning for the development of Bushehr Province (Mehdi, 2024). This suggests that geoeconomic planning should not be sectoral or fragmented. Instead, it should integrate coastal economic activities with human settlement patterns, transportation networks, environmental constraints, and local social capacities. Such an integrated approach is especially important because the social consequences of maritime-oriented development can be substantial. Research on the Makran coasts, for example, has highlighted the need to evaluate the social implications of sea-oriented development and to adopt more context-sensitive development strategies (Yaghoub & Maryam, 2025). Accordingly, the present results indicate that Bushehr's development model should simultaneously address economic competitiveness, social participation, cultural continuity, governance quality, and environmental sustainability.

Overall, the findings are consistent with the broader sustainability framework in which economic, social, institutional, and environmental dimensions are interdependent. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize that resilient development cannot be achieved through isolated economic interventions but requires inclusive institutions, environmental protection, social participation, and long-term planning (Sachs et al., 2022). The present study empirically reinforces this perspective at the provincial coastal level by demonstrating that social and cultural capacities are central drivers of sustainable geoeconomic development and that their effects are partly transmitted through local participation and good governance. Thus, Bushehr Province's geoeconomic potential can be more effectively realized when maritime-oriented economic strategies are embedded within strong local communities, participatory governance structures, transparent institutions, and socially and environmentally responsible development policies.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study employed a cross-sectional design, and therefore the estimated structural relationships indicate statistical associations rather than definitive longitudinal causal effects. Second, the questionnaire data were obtained from managers and experts associated with relevant institutions and sectors, which may limit the extent to which the findings represent the perspectives of ordinary residents, small-scale fishers, local entrepreneurs, women, younger residents, and other community groups. Third, purposive sampling was appropriate given the specialized nature of the research but restricts the generalizability of the findings to all coastal populations in Bushehr Province or other Iranian coastal regions. Fourth, the constructs were assessed using self-reported perceptions, which may be affected by social desirability, institutional orientation, and common-method bias. Finally, sustainable geoeconomic development is a multidimensional phenomenon, and some potentially relevant factors, such as infrastructure quality, technological

capacity, access to finance, geopolitical risk, environmental vulnerability, and regulatory stability, were not explicitly incorporated into the structural model.

Future studies could extend the present model in several directions. Longitudinal research is recommended to examine how changes in social capital, participation, governance quality, and coastal economic development evolve over time and to provide stronger evidence regarding causal mechanisms. Comparative research across Bushehr, Hormozgan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchestan provinces could determine whether the relationships identified in this study are consistent across different coastal contexts. Future studies should also include broader groups of local stakeholders, particularly fishers, tourism operators, coastal households, women, youth, environmental organizations, and small businesses. Multigroup analysis could be used to identify whether the model differs across occupations, geographic areas, or social groups. Additional variables, including institutional trust, environmental awareness, digital governance, infrastructure development, investment capacity, livelihood resilience, and perceived distributive justice, could also be incorporated into more comprehensive models. Mixed-method and qualitative studies would be valuable for explaining how local cultural knowledge and participatory processes operate in specific communities and how formal governance structures are experienced by coastal residents.

From a practical perspective, provincial policymakers and coastal development institutions should treat local social and cultural capacities as strategic assets within maritime-oriented development programs. Development plans should include structured mechanisms for community participation in decision-making, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation rather than relying solely on top-down consultation. Local knowledge, maritime cultural heritage, traditional occupations, and community networks should be systematically incorporated into tourism, fisheries, environmental management, and local entrepreneurship initiatives. Governance reforms should prioritize transparency, accountability, interagency coordination, rule of law, spatial justice, and clear mechanisms for stakeholder representation. Provincial authorities should also strengthen community-based organizations, facilitate dialogue between local residents and public institutions, and create transparent channels for public feedback and grievance resolution. Finally, investment and infrastructure policies should be evaluated not only according to their economic returns but also according to their contribution to local employment, livelihood security, environmental protection, equitable benefit distribution, and the long-term resilience of coastal communities.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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