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What do we know about Ritual Crime: A Systematic Review and Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

This study examines the structural factors contributing to ritual crime, focusing on socioeconomic inequality, cultural belief systems, and institutional limitations. A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis were conducted using peer-reviewed sources from JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete. Thirteen articles were included following a structured search and screening process. The findings identified five major themes: ideological justification and belief systems, symbolic and ritualistic practices, social control and power structures, group dynamics and collective identity, and structural vulnerability and victimization. Ritual crime was more prevalent in contexts marked by poverty, limited education, weak institutional oversight, and culturally embedded supernatural beliefs.

Keywords: Ritual Crime, Socioeconomic Inequality, Cultural Beliefs, Structural Vulnerability, Deprivation Theory, Criminal Justice Responses.

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1. Introduction

Ritual crime refers to a category of offenses involving acts performed within a specific religious or spiritual context, such as the sacrifice of humans or ritualistic practices (Trajtenberg et al., 2024). Ritual crime is important because it gives insight into the cultural and psychological context of violence and cruelty. The objective of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of ritual crimes. An important contribution of this study is that it will expand academic and society's understanding of ritual crime, an area that has limited scholarly attention. The research question guiding this study is: *"What do we know about ritual crime? A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis."* This question is significant because ritual crimes are often misunderstood, underreported, and influenced by cultural and religious interpretations that vary across regions.

Ritual crimes occur globally but are less prevalent nationally in the United States because of its structured government system and centralized law enforcement (Madfis, 2020). These crimes are most frequently reported in the continents of Africa, Asia, and parts of Latin America, particularly in Mexico (Madfis, 2020). In African countries, ritual crime is normalized within spiritual or cultural contexts, which contributes to underreporting and low clearance rates (Amnesty International, 2025). Countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria, and South Africa have been identified as having higher documented involvement in ritualistic crime (Owusu, 2025). These regions provide critical contexts for understanding how cultural beliefs intersect with economic deprivation to produce violence, as individuals may turn to ritualistic practices with the expectation of gaining wealth, protection, or social advancement (Owusu, 2025; Tade & Akeredolu, 2022).

In parts of Asia, ritualistic and supernatural-based crimes have been documented and are often tied to cultural beliefs and traditional practices (Spanò, 2023). For example, accusations of witchcraft in countries such as India, Nepal, and Indonesia have resulted in violent killings and assaults against women believed to practice harmful magic (Atreya et al., 2021). The historic Toa Payoh ritual murders in 1981 in Singapore serve as an example of how spiritual beliefs can cross paths with violent criminal activities, showing that ritual murders are not limited to the modern day (Foo, 2021). However, because many ritual crimes in Asia go unreported or are classified differently in statistics, there is a lack of comprehensive global data on their occurrence.



The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered crime patterns in Asia and Africa due to lockdowns, economic disruption, and social instability. Research shows that overall crime rates declined during periods of restricted movement, but these trends didn't necessarily change beliefs or ritual crimes (Trajtenberg et al., 2024). Both continents experienced widespread fear and uncertainty and suffered financially, which strengthened the need for spiritual and supernatural explanations for disease and bad luck. According to Owusu (2025), pandemic-related stress may have worsened ritual violence, especially against minors and accusations of witchcraft in African countries where ritual crimes are already embedded in the culture. In comparison, in several countries in Asia, the economic hardship and social isolation from COVID-19 strengthened old belief systems, which would have contributed to crimes with ritualistic motivations (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026; Trajtenberg et al., 2024; African Child Policy Forum, 2021).

Previous studies show that ritual crimes are more prevalent in certain countries across Asia and Africa than in other regions (Madfis, 2020). According to research based on media reports, more than 16 ritual murders take place annually, demonstrating the ongoing nature of violence motivated by beliefs (Ritual Killing in Africa, n.d.). A study analyzing 96 media articles documented 116 victims, 62 of whom were children, meaning approximately 53% of victims were minors (Ritual Killing in Africa, n.d.). Countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa are frequently mentioned in the literature (Amnesty International, 2025). In these contexts, ritual violence is often associated with spiritual traditions, cultural practices, and witchcraft beliefs (Owusu, 2025).

Similar patterns have also been documented in parts of Asia, where countries such as India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Singapore have also reported cases of ritual or belief-motivated crimes (IJCRT, 2025). The Toa Payoh ritual killings in Singapore continue to rank among the most thoroughly recorded ritual homicide cases in the region (Foo, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic influenced crime trends in countries with higher levels of ritual crime, although its impacts were not always easily measured (Trajtenberg et al., 2024). Lockdowns reduced overall crime rates, but they had less of an impact on limited mobility and frequently resulted in underreporting of belief-based and ritual crimes (Trajtenberg et al., 2024). In both African and Asian countries, economic hardship, school closures, and social

tension during the pandemic may have intensified reliance on spiritual theories for misfortune and potential ritual violence (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026; Trajtenberg et al., 2024; African Child Policy Forum, 2021).

Globally, ritual crime is commonly understood as violence rooted in supernatural or spiritual belief systems, although regional perceptions differ. Ritual crimes are frequently viewed in African cultures as being related to witchcraft, ancestral spirits, or spiritual sacrifices. This might cause communities to embrace or defend such crimes (Amnesty International, 2023). Similarly, in Asia, belief-based violence is sometimes linked to traditional religious practices or local traditions, influencing how ritual crimes are perceived and explained (Spanò, 2023). One significant geographic similarity between African and Asian regions is that in times of crisis or uncertainty, ritual crimes are usually explained by non-scientific reasons (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026). However, there are significant differences in the legal and political approaches. While some developing cultures may see ritual crimes as a cultural or spiritual challenge, Western countries tend to characterize them as strict criminal activities (Madfis, 2020). Another difference is the lack of government recognition, since many nations do not have specific legal classifications for ritual crimes (Madfis, 2020). Therefore, rather than a single definition, cultural traditions, legal frameworks, and social values influence the global concept of ritual crime.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced how ritual crime was understood and discussed across different regions of the world. Particularly in countries with strong traditional belief systems, the pandemic's widespread fear, sickness, and economic instability increased dependence on spiritual and supernatural explanations for misfortune (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026). The perception and explanation of ritual violence were impacted in various parts of Africa by COVID-19, which enhanced beliefs that associated death and illness with witchcraft or spiritual punishment (African Child Policy Forum, 2021). In South Asia, comparable patterns were noted, as pandemic stress supported traditional understandings of disease and a divided society (Spanò, 2023). Although overall crime declined during the pandemic, belief-based violence often remained hidden or was culturally justified rather than criminalized. COVID-19 also decreased legal oversight and access to social services (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026).

Previous studies show that victims of ritual crime are most often children and other socially disadvantaged people, particularly in the regions of Africa and Asia



(Amnesty International, 2023). Children are frequently the victims of ritual killings in several African nations because they are disproportionately targeted due to the idea that they are spiritually pure or have supernatural value (Owusu, 2025). According to research from Ghana, children were the main victim group in documented ritual crime incidents, with over half of the victims being minors (Ritual Killing in Africa, n.d.). In addition to children, individuals who lack social protection and advocacy, such as those who are orphaned, disabled, and impoverished, are also more vulnerable (Amnesty International, 2025). In parts of Asia, similar patterns can be seen where victims are frequently members of minority groups impacted by traditional belief systems and superstition (Spanò, 2023). In multiple documented cases across rural regions, women and elders were victims of witchcraft accusations (Amnesty International, 2025).

2. Method

The research question for this paper is “*What do we know about ritual crimes?*” This research uses a systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis to examine existing literature on ritual crimes. By reviewing existing literature, this study aims to clarify how ritual crimes are defined, the motivations behind them, and how the criminal justice system responds. Meta-synthesis examines and integrates the results of several studies to identify recurring themes and deeper meanings. A systematic review provides a structured approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant research. In this case, this study will serve to expand understanding of ritual crimes and provide insight into the social, cultural, and psychological factors that contribute to their occurrence.

The main databases used for research were JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete. These databases helped locate articles to read and evaluate before deciding to pursue or carry out more thorough reviews. JSTOR was selected because it provides access to peer-reviewed academic journals across criminal justice. SAGE Journals was chosen because of its strong collection of criminology and sociology research. Academic Search Complete was used because it offers diverse research publications relevant to criminal justice and cultural studies. To guarantee that the study represents current research and modern interpretations of ritual crimes, the publication years were limited to 2020–2026, with one

exception: a 2012 article by Berry was included due to its foundational relevance to understanding blood libel narratives and their role in ritualized violence. Recent searches are significant because of evolving social media narratives, misinformation, and recent criminal justice responses frequently impact ritual crimes. The search was limited to English-language articles for accurate interpretation and analysis. Only peer-reviewed academic journal articles were included to maintain scholarly reliability.

The steps taken to access each database are the same until it is time to navigate and filter each one separately. For the JSTOR database, the VSU library website was accessed, “Databases” was selected, then “All Subjects,” and “Criminal Justice” was chosen. From the list of databases, JSTOR was selected, and the advanced search feature was used. The search term “ritual crimes” was typed in, the search was limited to abstracts, and a custom range from 2020 to 2026 was set, which initially produced four results. After refining the results to English-language articles and ensuring every result was available, five results were obtained, and after reviewing the abstracts, two articles were ultimately selected for this study.

For the SAGE database, the same initial steps through the VSU Library were followed; Criminal Justice was selected before accessing SAGE. The search for “ritual crimes” was conducted; results were limited to abstracts, and the publication range was set from 2020 to 2026. This search produced 12 results, and after reviewing each abstract for relevance to the research, six articles were selected for review. Lastly, for Academic Search Complete, “ritual crime” was searched; results were limited to abstracts, filtered to English, and the publication date range was set from 2020 to 2026. This search produced five results. After viewing each abstract, it was determined that all five articles were relevant and supportive of the study, so all five sources from this database were selected. In total, ten sources were included in the final analysis.

In all three databases, the screening process included reviewing article titles for relevance to ritual crimes, reading abstracts to determine alignment with the research question, and conducting full-text reviews when necessary to confirm relevance. Articles were excluded if they only briefly mentioned ritual crimes without substantive discussion, were not written in English, or were not peer-reviewed articles. The articles included were published between 2020 and 2026 (with the exception of the Berry, 2012 article), focused directly on ritual crimes or



closely related forms of ritualistic violence, and discussed social, psychological, and cultural aspects of ritual crimes.

To ensure rigor in the qualitative synthesis, the authors employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. This involved: (1) familiarization with the selected sources, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. For coding and thematic analysis, the qualitative analysis tool *Taguette* was used to systematically highlight key concepts and organize initial codes. This tool allowed for the grouping of related ideas, identification of patterns across articles, and creation of categories in a structured way. Additionally, an Excel spreadsheet and a Word document were used to further organize codes, categories, and themes, facilitating the management of research findings in an organized format.

A quality assessment was conducted for each included source, evaluating methodological rigor, relevance to the research question, and contribution to the overall understanding of ritual crime. All thirteen sources were determined to be of sufficient quality for inclusion. The selected articles were analyzed to identify recurring themes related to psychological motivations, cultural influences, belief systems, and criminal justice responses to ritual crimes.

3. Literature Review

1. Berry, D. T. (2012). Blood on the tongue: Reading abjection in nationalist blood libels from Nazi Germany to Hamas and the British National Party. *Journal of Hate Studies*, 10(1), Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.115>

Damon T. Berry conducted this study to examine how blood libel narratives have been used in nationalist movements to promote hatred and exclusion. Blood libels are false accusations that certain groups, historically Jewish communities, use the blood of others for ritual purposes. The author sought to examine how these narratives developed in various settings, such as the British National Party, Nazi Germany, and Hamas rhetoric, and how they contribute to violence, fear, and

dehumanization of targeted people (Berry, 2012, pp. 2–4). This source is included despite its 2012 publication date because it provides foundational theoretical insights into how ritualized narratives are constructed and used to justify violence, offering important context that more recent studies build upon.

The study used a qualitative theoretical approach, focusing on textual and rhetorical analysis. Berry studied political speeches, propaganda, historical documents, and ideological writings from the groups mentioned. The analysis focused on the ways in which language and symbolism are used to create disgust and justify hostility toward certain populations (Berry, 2012, pp. 4–7). The results demonstrate how blood libel narratives are used as powerful propaganda tools to portray targeted groups as dangerous, impure, or evil. These narratives create emotional reactions such as fear and disgust, which can make violence against those groups seem acceptable or justified. The study found similarities in how different nationalist movements use these ideas despite differences in time and location (Berry, 2012, pp. 7–10).

Berry concludes that blood libel narratives play a significant role in reinforcing extremist ideologies and promoting social division. These narratives support prejudice and violence among nationalist organizations by portraying populations as dangers (Berry, 2012, pp. 10–12). One limitation is that the study focuses on rhetorical analysis rather than empirical data. This means it does not measure the direct impact of these narratives on behavior. Additional research could explore how these ideas influence real-world actions (Berry, 2012, p.12). Despite this limitation, the study offers valuable insights into how ideological narratives can normalize violence, a pattern also observed in contemporary ritual crimes.

2. Friedrichs, C. R. (2020). House-Destruction as a Ritual of Punishment in Early Modern Europe. *European History Quarterly*, 50(4), 599–624.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691420960917>

Christopher R. Friedrichs conducted this research to examine the historical practice of destroying a criminal's home as a form of punishment in early modern Europe. He aimed to understand why this practice existed and what symbolic meaning it carried within communities. Rather than simply punishing individuals, house destruction served as a public act meant to shame offenders and reinforce social order. Friedrichs explores how this ritual punishment reflected broader ideas



about justice, authority, and community responsibility during this period (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 599–602).

The study used historical analysis by examining legal records, historical documents, and accounts of punishment practices across several European regions. Friedrichs reviewed cases where authorities ordered the destruction of homes belonging to criminals, rebels, or individuals accused of serious offenses. He was able to spot trends in the use of this particular punishment by examining these documents. To comprehend the practice's social and cultural significance, the approach concentrated on analyzing historical data (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 603–607). The results demonstrate that the destruction of homes served as a symbolic and physical form of punishment. In addition to punishing the criminal, destroying the home served as a public example of the repercussions of breaking the law or social norms. The ritual often involved community participation and was meant to restore order after serious crimes or acts of rebellion (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 608–615).

Friedrichs concludes that house destruction functioned as a ritualized punishment that upheld social control and authority. The practice reflected how early modern societies used public punishment to maintain order and deter criminal behavior (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 616–620). One limitation is that the research relies primarily on historical documents, which cannot accurately represent the viewpoints of those who were punished. Furthermore, the study focuses on specific regions in Europe, which may limit broader generalizations about punishment practices (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 620–624). Nevertheless, the study provides important historical context for understanding how ritualized punishment has been used across cultures to reinforce social norms and authority.

3. Loza, Y. (2022). Women's bodies and lives as symbols of patriarchal codes: Honor killings. *Social Science Information*, 61(4), 371–389.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184221129227>

Yasmine Loza conducted this research to examine how honor killings function within patriarchal societies and how women's bodies and behavior are used as symbols of family honor. The study aims to understand why these killings occur and

how cultural norms and gender expectations contribute to violence against women. The author argues that honor killings are not only individual acts of violence but are also tied to broader systems of social control that reinforce patriarchal values. The study aims to show how cultural views of gender roles, honor, and shame shape the justification of these crimes (Loza, 2022, pp. 371–374).

The study uses qualitative analysis and draws on sociological and cultural research related to honor killings. Loza examines academic literature, documented cases, and social theories about violence, gender, and patriarchy. She also studies how honor killings are perceived and addressed in various cultural and social contexts by reviewing these sources. This approach allows the researcher to explore the relationship between gender norms and violent punishment directed toward women who are believed to have violated social expectations (Loza, 2022, pp. 375–379). The findings suggest that honor killings are strongly connected to patriarchal social systems where family reputation and control over women's behavior are highly valued. Women may be targeted for actions such as choosing their own partners, refusing arranged marriages, or being seen as violating moral expectations. The study shows that communities frequently justify these killings as a means of upholding social order and restoring family honor (Loza, 2022, pp. 380–384).

Loza concludes that honor killings reflect deep-rooted gender inequalities and systems of patriarchal control. She emphasizes the need for stronger legal protections, social awareness, and cultural change to address violence against women and challenge the beliefs that support these practices (Loza, 2022, pp. 385–387). One limitation of the study is that it relies heavily on existing literature and documented cases rather than original empirical data. Additionally, cultural variations across regions may restrict the findings' relevance (Loza, 2022, pp. 387–389). Despite this, the study offers critical insights into how gender-based violence can be ritualized and justified through cultural narratives, a pattern that parallels other forms of ritual crime.



4. Marasinova, L. (2022). Forced penance in Russian monasteries in the second half of the 18th century: From punishment of the body to correction of the soul. *Russian History*, 49(2-4), 363-379. <https://doi.org/10.30965/18763316-12340054>

Lena Marasinova conducted this study to examine the role of forced penance in Russian monasteries during the second half of the eighteenth century. The research explores how monasteries were used as places of punishment and correction within Russian society. The author aimed to understand how religious institutions participated in systems of discipline and social control, especially for those who were accused of moral, social, or criminal wrongdoing. People who were punished were sent to monasteries. By analyzing these historical sources, Marasinova also aimed to demonstrate how religious punishment reflected broader legal and political practices in Russia during this period (Marasinova, 2022, pp.363-365).

Historical studies of eighteenth-century documents and archival records were used in the study. Marasinova looked through administrative files, court records, and church records and identified how forced penance was implemented and how authorities used monasteries to discipline individuals. Using this approach, the researcher was able to comprehend the political and religious roles that monasteries performed in Russian society (Marasinova, 2022, pp.366-369). The findings show that monasteries served as places of punishment where people were taken to carry out religious penance under supervision. These punishments were used for a variety of offenses, including moral violations, family conflicts, and political issues. The study also found that forced penance served both religious and governmental purposes, reinforcing authority and social order during this period (Marasinova, 2022, pp.370-374).

Marasinova concludes that forced penance in monasteries played an important role in maintaining social discipline in eighteenth-century Russia. Religious institutions worked closely with the state to regulate behavior and enforce moral expectations within society (Marasinova, 2022, pp. 375--377). The study's heavy reliance on historical data, which may not accurately reflect the experiences of the people who were punished, is one of its limitations. Additionally, the research

focuses specifically on Russia in the eighteenth century, which may limit its application to other historical contexts (Marasinova, 2022, pp.377–379). However, the study illustrates how religious institutions can function as instruments of social control, a dynamic also observed in contemporary ritual crime contexts.

5. McCann, B. J. (2022). Serial murder as modernist ritual. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 25(3), 49–74.
<https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.25.3.0049>

The purpose of this study was to explore how serial murder functions not only as criminal behavior but also as a type of cultural ritual within modern society. Bryan J. McCann sought to examine how society views serial killers and how American culture's larger patterns of violence and obsession are reflected in the rituals surrounding their crimes. According to the author, serial killings are linked to what he calls a "sadistic form," which refers to violent patterns that society both disapproves of and finds oddly appealing (McCann, 2022, p.49). The study focuses on the hypothesis that serial killers' actions are like other socially acceptable forms of cruelty. McCann uses the case of Ted Bundy as a central example to explore how the crimes and the public's reaction to them reveal deeper cultural meanings. The study's overall objective was to show that serial killings should be examined as both an individual criminal act and a component of a broader cultural system that influences how violence is seen and interpreted (McCann, 2022, pp. 50–52).

The study used qualitative rhetorical analysis rather than statistical or experimental methods. McCann examined media coverage, historical accounts, and cultural commentary related to serial murder. Ted Bundy's crimes and the public's reaction to his trial and execution were the main subjects of the study. The author examined how serial murder is presented in public media coverage and how society contributes to the context surrounding these crimes by analyzing these cultural texts (McCann, 2022, pp. 52–56). The findings suggest that serial murder often follows patterns that resemble ritualistic behavior. McCann found that repeated actions by serial killers and public attention surrounding their crimes create a symbolic process that draws societal fascination. Media coverage, courtroom drama, and public reactions contribute to turning serial murder cases into cultural events. These responses reinforce society's complex relationship with violence (McCann, 2022, pp. 60–66).



McCann concludes that serial murder should be understood as a modern cultural ritual that reveals how society interprets and responds to violence. The public's fascination with serial killers demonstrates how violence can become normalized through media and public discussion (McCann, 2022, pp.66-70). The study relies on rhetorical interpretation rather than empirical data, which could introduce bias. Additionally, the focus on Ted Bundy may limit how well the findings apply to other serial murder cases or cultural contexts (McCann, 2022, pp.70-72). Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into how media and public discourse can ritualize and normalize extreme violence, a pattern also relevant to understanding community responses to ritual crime.

6. Owusu, E. S. (2025a). The superstition that mutilates children in Africa: Exploring the scale and features of juju-driven pedicide in Kenya. *Homicide Studies: An Interdisciplinary & International Journal*, 29(2), 162-184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10887679221129302>

Emmanuel Sarpong Owusu conducted this study to investigate the issue of child killings linked to superstition and ritual practices, commonly referred to as juju-driven pedicide, in Kenya. Understanding the scope, traits, and motives behind these crimes was the aim of this study. According to the author, certain cultures have seen violence against children because of ritualistic behaviors and beliefs in supernatural powers. The study aimed to highlight how these beliefs influence criminal behavior and to bring attention to the social and cultural factors that contribute to such crimes (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 162-165). This study is particularly significant as it provides empirical evidence of how supernatural beliefs directly translate into violent offending, especially against children.

The study used qualitative and documentary research methods. Owusu analyzed case studies, reports, criminal histories, and media coverage about juju-driven child homicides in Kenya. These sources were analyzed to identify patterns in the crimes, including the motivations, victims, and circumstances surrounding the offenses. Owusu determined the frequency of these crimes and the common characteristics associated with them by examining several documented cases (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 166-170). The findings show that juju-driven pedicide is

connected to strong beliefs in supernatural power, acquiring wealth, and spiritual rituals. In many cases, perpetrators believed that harming or sacrificing children would bring good fortune, protection, and financial success. The study also found that these crimes often involve vulnerable victims and are influenced by cultural beliefs, poverty, and lack of law enforcement response (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 171–177).

Owusu concludes that juju-driven pedicide is a serious social problem that requires stronger legal enforcement, community education, and cultural awareness. He also emphasizes the importance of addressing harmful superstitions and protecting children through policy and public intervention (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 178–181). One limitation is that the research relies heavily on documented cases and reports, which may not capture all incidents due to underreporting. The accuracy of determining the actual scope of these crimes may also be impacted by cultural sensitivity and the lack of data. Despite these limitations, the study provides critical evidence of how economic desperation and supernatural beliefs intersect to produce ritual violence against children.

7. Owusu, E. S. (2025b). Ritual Child Homicide in Contemporary Africa: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature. *International Criminal Justice Review*, 35(3), 278–304.

The purpose of this study was to review existing research on ritual child homicide in contemporary Africa. Emmanuel Sarpong Owusu aimed to better understand how widespread these crimes are and the factors that contribute to them. Ritual child homicide refers to the killing of children for spiritual or paranormal purposes, often linked to beliefs that body parts can bring wealth, protection, or supernatural power. To find trends in the causes, victims, and social circumstances associated with these crimes, the author reviewed previous empirical research. The goal was to provide a clearer understanding of the issue and highlight gaps in the current research (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 278–281). This systematic review is particularly valuable as it synthesizes findings across multiple studies, providing a comprehensive overview of ritual child homicide in Africa.

The study used a systematic literature review to analyze previously published empirical research on ritual child homicide in Africa. Owusu gathered and reviewed scholarly research, reports, and documented cases on this topic. The selected



sources were reviewed to identify common themes, patterns, and findings across different studies. Using this method, the author was able to evaluate findings from other studies and develop what is currently known regarding ritual child homicide (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 282–286). The review found that ritual child homicide is often linked to strong beliefs in supernatural power, economic gain, and traditional spiritual practices. Many studies have reported that children are targeted because they are viewed as spiritually “pure” or powerful for ritual purposes. The results also show that in certain groups, poverty, weak law enforcement, and cultural beliefs all play a role in the ongoing nature of these crimes (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 287–296).

Owusu concludes that ritual child homicide remains a significant social and criminal justice issue in parts of Africa. The author emphasizes the need for stronger law enforcement, better child protection policies, and increased public awareness to reduce these crimes (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 297–300). One limitation of the study is that it relies on existing research, which may be limited or incomplete. Some cases may not be reported or documented, which could affect the accuracy of the findings. Additionally, the author points out that additional empirical research is required to fully understand the scope of ritual child homicide (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 300–304). This review provides a strong foundation for understanding the structural and cultural factors driving ritual child homicide in Africa.

8. Pereda, V. (2021). Macabre ceremonies: How Los Zetas produces extreme violence to promote organizational cohesion. *Violence: An International Journal*, 2(2), 278–296.

Valentin Pereda conducted this study to understand why the Mexican criminal organization Los Zetas uses extreme violence as part of its operations. The author specifically examines how violent acts and ritual-like ceremonies are used to strengthen loyalty and unity within the group. The purpose of the study was to investigate how members of organized criminal groups use violence to maintain group identity and control, in addition to using it as a means of intimidation. Pereda focuses on how these violent practices help maintain discipline and cohesion within the organization (Pereda, 2021, pp. 278–281). This study is significant as it demonstrates how ritualized violence functions not only in cultural or spiritual

contexts but also within organized criminal groups, highlighting the broader applicability of ritual crime concepts.

The study uses qualitative research methods and draws on secondary sources such as investigative reports, court records, journalistic accounts, and previous academic research about Los Zetas. Pereda examines recorded instances of extreme violence committed by the cartel to spot trends and comprehend the symbolic significance of these actions. By examining these sources, the author evaluates how violent practices function within the organization's internal structure (Pereda, 2021, pp. 282–286). The findings show that Los Zetas often use brutal acts, including torture and public displays of violence, as ritualized practices meant to reinforce loyalty and obedience among members. These acts also serve as demonstrations of power and commitment to the group. According to the research, these violent rituals ensure that members stay devoted to the organization and preserve internal cohesiveness (Pereda, 2021, pp. 287–291).

Pereda concludes that extreme violence within Los Zetas is not random but strategically used to strengthen organizational unity and reinforce group identity. These actions contribute to the cartel's common culture of discipline, terror, and allegiance (Pereda, 2021, pp. 292–294). One limitation is that the study relies largely on secondary sources and documented reports, which may not capture all internal dynamics of the organization. Additionally, limited access to direct information from cartel members may affect the depth of analysis (Pereda, 2021, pp. 294–296). Nevertheless, the study provides important insights into how ritualized violence functions within organized groups, a dynamic that parallels ritual crimes in other contexts.

9. Tade, O., & Akeredolu, B. C. (2022). 'They Smashed the Heads of Their Victims with Grinding Stone': Badoo Cult Gang and Victimization Experiences in Lagos State. *Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice*, 5(2), 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25166069221127375>

The purpose of this study was to examine the activities of the Badoo cult gang in Lagos State, Nigeria, and to explore the experiences of victims and communities affected by the group's violent attacks. The researchers aimed to understand how the gang operated, the methods used during attacks, and the impact these crimes had on local communities. The study also aimed to provide an explanation for the



gang's violent actions and the terror they instilled in the locals (Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp.149–152). This study is particularly valuable as it incorporates victim perspectives, providing insights into the community impact of ritual violence.

The researchers use qualitative research methods to gather information about the Badoo cult gang. Interviews, media coverage, and recorded testimonies from victims and community members were used to gather data. These sources allowed the authors to analyze the patterns of attacks and the experiences of individuals who were directly affected by the gang's actions (Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp.153–156). The results demonstrate that the Badoo cult gang committed extremely brutal crimes, frequently targeting families at night and killing victims with blunt objects like grinding stones. These attacks were frequently linked to ritualistic beliefs and criminal activities intended to gain wealth or power. The study found that the violence created widespread fear and insecurity within communities in Lagos State (Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp.157–160).

The authors conclude that the Badoo cult gang represents a serious criminal and social problem. The study highlights the need for stronger law enforcement efforts, improved community security, and greater public awareness to prevent similar crimes in the future (Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp.161–163). The study's dependence on reported cases and interviews, which might not adequately represent every incident or viewpoints pertaining to the gang's operations, is one of its limitations. Additionally, limited access to gang members restricted deeper analysis of their internal motivations (Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp.163–165). Despite these limitations, the study offers critical insights into the community-level impact of ritual crime and the fear it generates.

10. Williams, D. U. (2022). 'Prosperity theology': Poverty and implications for socio-economic development in Africa. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 78(1), Article 7818. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7818>

Dodeye U. Williams conducted this study to examine the concept of prosperity theology and its influence on poverty and socioeconomic development in Africa. Prosperity theology teaches that faith, positive thinking, and financial giving can

lead to material wealth and success. The author aimed to explore whether these teachings support or hinder economic development in African societies where poverty is widespread. The study also investigates how people's perceptions of wealth, poverty, and social responsibility are influenced by their religious views (Williams, 2022, pp. 2-3). While this source does not directly address ritual crime, it provides important context for understanding how religious beliefs about wealth and success can influence behavior and potentially contribute to ritual violence, as individuals may turn to extreme measures in pursuit of financial gain.

The research used a qualitative and theoretical approach. Williams examined previous research on prosperity theology in Africa as well as religious doctrine, scriptural interpretations, and socio-economic debates. He also analyzed how the theology developed historically and how it is practiced in many Pentecostal churches across the continent. Additionally, the study contrasted traditional African cultural norms that prioritize cooperation and community responsibility with prosperity theology (Williams, 2022, pp. 3-5). The results demonstrate the rapid growth of prosperity theology in Africa due to its promises of financial success, healing, and reducing poverty. Many people are attracted to these teachings during difficult economic conditions. However, the study found that the focus on individual wealth and material success may weaken traditional values such as hard work, accountability, and community cooperation (Williams, 2022, pp. 5-6).

Williams concludes that prosperity theology does not effectively address the structural causes of poverty in Africa. Instead, the author argues that African cultural values, particularly the concept of "Ubuntu," which emphasizes community support and shared responsibility, offer a more sustainable approach to socioeconomic growth (Williams, 2022, pp. 6-7). One limitation of the study is that it relies mainly on literature and theoretical analysis rather than direct empirical research. Further research utilizing fieldwork or interviews may offer a deeper understanding of the practical effects of prosperity theology on communities (Williams, 2022, pp. 7). Despite this limitation, the study offers valuable insights into how religious beliefs about wealth and success may intersect with the economic motivations behind ritual crime.



3.1 Synthesis of Literature Review

Across the ten reviewed sources, several key patterns emerge. First, ritual crime is consistently linked to belief systems—whether religious, spiritual, or ideological—that provide justification for violence and normalize harmful behaviors within communities (Berry, 2012; Owusu, 2025a, 2025b; Loza, 2022). Second, structural conditions such as poverty, weak law enforcement, and limited institutional oversight create environments where ritual crimes are more likely to occur and persist (Owusu, 2025b; Tade & Akeredolu, 2022; Marasinova, 2022). Third, ritualized violence serves various social functions, including maintaining group identity (Pereda, 2021), reinforcing social control (Friedrichs, 2020; Marasinova, 2022), and communicating symbolic meanings to communities (McCann, 2022; Friedrichs, 2020). Fourth, certain populations—particularly children, women, and economically vulnerable individuals—are disproportionately targeted as victims (Owusu, 2025a, 2025b; Loza, 2022; Tade & Akeredolu, 2022). These patterns highlight the complex interplay between culture, structure, and institutional response that sustains ritual crime across different regions.

4. Results

4.1 Theme 1: Ideological Justification and Belief Systems

Belief systems and ideological narratives that present violence as acceptable and significant within cultural and social contexts are frequently the foundation of ritual crime. Blood libels and other propaganda narratives have long been used to incite hatred and depict targeted people as dangerous or evil, making violence against them seem legitimate (Berry, 2012, pp. 2-4). However, belief in supernatural power encourages people to carry out destructive acts with the hope of obtaining success, fortune, or protection (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 162-165; Tade & Akeredolu, 2022, pp. 157-160).

Cultural and religious beliefs also support these acts, since prosperity theology fosters the notion that faith may result in material success and influences people's perceptions of wealth and personal outcomes (Williams, 2022, pp. 2-3). Furthermore, even in cases of extreme violence, communities may defend actions like honor killings as essential to maintaining traditional values and reestablishing

social order (Loza, 2022, pp. 380–384). Institutional structures also contribute by upholding moral standards and justifying punishment as essential to societal control and discipline (Marasinova, 2022, pp. 377–379). In general, these interrelated ideas show how institutions that justify violence encourage and maintain ritual crime. The COVID-19 pandemic may have intensified reliance on these belief systems, as economic hardship, fear, and social isolation during the pandemic strengthened spiritual and supernatural explanations for misfortune (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026; African Child Policy Forum, 2021).

4.2 Theme 2: Symbolic and Ritualistic Practices

Ritual crime is characterized by symbols and organized behaviors that give violent acts a deeper meaning than their immediate physical consequences. To reinforce negative meanings and justify harmful actions, language and symbolism are frequently used to shape perceptions and evoke emotional reactions (Berry, 2012, pp. 4–7). In many cases, ritual behavior is evident in patterns of violence, where repeated actions and symbolic repetition contribute to a broader cultural or psychological process (McCann, 2022, p.49; pp. 60–66).

These symbolic practices, including ritualized repetition, the use of meaningful symbols, and performative acts intended to convey messages to audiences, are also evident in forms of punishment, where ritualized acts serve not only to penalize individuals but also to communicate consequences and reinforce social norms within a community (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 599–602). Additionally, honor-based symbolism highlights how individuals, particularly women, can represent broader cultural values tied to reputation and societal expectations (Loza, 2022, pp. 371–374). Also, violence can serve as a kind of ritual performance, especially in organized organizations where violent acts are performed symbolically to uphold internal unity and assert dominance (Pereda, 2021, pp. 287–291). Overall, these trends demonstrate the structure, symbolism, and deep significance of ritual crime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these symbolic practices may have taken on new meanings, as communities sought to make sense of widespread death and suffering through ritualistic and supernatural explanations (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026).



4.3 Theme 3: Social Control and Power Structures

Ritual crime frequently serves as a social control mechanism, using violence to uphold social order and impose authority. Acts like honor-based violence show how societal expectations and gender inequalities are upheld in patriarchal societies by controlling people, especially women (Loza, 2022, pp. 371–374). Institutional authority, when religious and political systems collaborate to regulate conduct and enforce discipline through organized punishment, further supports this form of control (Marasinova, 2022, pp. 370–374; pp. 363–365).

By publicly illustrating the repercussions of breaking social standards, ritualized punishment techniques also contribute to the maintenance of social order. For example, destructive punishments, like demolishing homes, serve as a symbolic act intended to restore order and discourage future ritual crime, in addition to being penalties (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 599–602). Similarly, violent acts inside structured groups can be used as power displays to uphold authority and guarantee compliance among members (Pereda, 2021, pp. 287–291). Overall, these practices show how ritual crime is performed strategically to regulate behavior, maintain hierarchical structures, and reinforce systems of power within both communities and institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic may have weakened formal institutional controls, potentially allowing ritualized violence to persist or even increase as traditional authority structures were disrupted (African Child Policy Forum, 2021).

4.4 Theme 4: Group Dynamics and Collective Identity

Ritualized crime is strongly shaped by group dynamics, where shared beliefs and collective identity influence individuals to participate in and justify violence. Social exclusion and negative portrayals of targeted groups contribute to this process by framing certain populations as dangerous or inferior, which supports fear and dehumanization (Berry, 2012, pp. 2–4; pp. 7–10). These narratives reinforce extremist ideologies, making violence appear acceptable within the group and strengthening divisions between “us” and “them” (Berry, 2012, p.12).

Group involvement also plays a critical role, as ritualized acts of punishment or violence often involve collective participation, reinforcing shared responsibility and normalizing harmful behaviors within the community (Friedrichs, 2020, pp. 608–615). In organized groups, such as criminal organizations, violence is used to

strengthen loyalty and maintain unity among group members (Pereda, 2021, pp. 278–281). These practices contribute to the development of a strong group identity, where individuals align themselves with the values and expectations of the group, even when they involve extreme actions (Pereda, 2021, pp. 292–294). Overall, these patterns show that ritual crime is not only an individual act but a socially reinforced behavior shaped by group influence and identity. The social isolation caused by COVID-19 may have strengthened in-group bonds and reinforced collective beliefs, as communities turned inward and relied more heavily on traditional support networks (Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026).

4.5 Theme 5: Structural Vulnerability and Victimization

Ritual crime is shaped by broader social and structural conditions that influence both victimization and the persistence of violent practices. Social and cultural factors, including deeply rooted beliefs and traditions, play a significant role in shaping behaviors associated with ritual crime (Owusu, 2025a, pp. 162–165). Structural conditions such as poverty, weak law enforcement, and limited resources further contribute to the continuation of these crimes by creating environments where they are more likely to occur and go unpunished (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 287–296). Victim selection is also influenced by these conditions, as certain groups, particularly children, are targeted based on beliefs that they possess spiritual purity or value for ritual purposes (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 287–296). Economic motivations reinforce this pattern, as individuals may engage in ritual violence with the expectation of gaining wealth or financial success (Owusu, 2025b, pp. 287–296).

External influences such as media also play a role by shaping public perceptions and contributing to the normalization of violence through repeated exposure and cultural fascination (McCann, 2022, p.49; pp. 66–70). Additionally, gender norms and inequalities contribute to gender-based violence, reinforcing harmful practices within certain cultural contexts (Loza, 2022, pp.371–379). Overall, these factors allow ritual crime to persist across societies. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these structural vulnerabilities, as economic hardship, school closures, and reduced access to social services created conditions in which vulnerable populations, particularly children, faced increased risk of victimization (African Child Policy Forum, 2021; Trajtenberg et al., 2024).



5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between ritual crime and underlying socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors, with attention to how these elements contribute to victimization and patterns of offending. The primary objective was to explore why ritual crimes occur and to assess whether broader social conditions, such as poverty, inequality, and belief systems, play a significant role in sustaining these practices. The findings indicate that the research objectives were successfully met, as clear connections were identified between structural disadvantage and the prevalence of ritual-related offenses.

The study revealed that ritual crimes are often concentrated in areas characterized by economic hardship, limited access to education, and weak institutional oversight. Additionally, belief in supernatural or culturally embedded practices was found to influence both the motivation for committing these crimes and community responses to them. In many cases, perpetrators justified their actions to achieve financial gain, protection, or social advancement, reflecting a complex intersection of cultural belief systems and economic desperation. The findings also suggest that victimization is not random, as individuals who are socially and economically vulnerable are more likely to be targeted. This includes those with limited social protection, showing how structural inequality shapes not only offending but also victim selection.

These findings reinforce key arguments within deprivation and conflict perspectives, which emphasize that individuals facing blocked opportunities may turn to alternative, often violent, means to achieve socially valued goals. This supports the idea that structural inequalities do not only influence motivation but also create environments in which certain forms of crime become more normalized. Additionally, the normalization or quiet acceptance of certain belief systems within communities may reduce collective intervention, allowing these crimes to continue despite legal prohibitions. This reflects not only economic strain but also flaws in official social control.

Overall, the findings suggest that ritual crime should be understood as a socially embedded phenomenon rather than an isolated or purely culturally driven act. This is significant because it challenges simplified explanations of ritual crime and highlights the need to address broader social conditions rather than focusing solely

on individual accountability. The interaction between economic pressure, belief systems, and weak institutional response plays a critical role in sustaining these offenses.

The findings also highlight the need to consider the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic appears to have amplified several factors that contribute to ritual crime: economic hardship, social isolation, heightened fear and uncertainty, and weakened institutional oversight (Trajtenberg et al., 2024; Dei & Anane-Donkor, 2026). In both African and Asian contexts, the pandemic strengthened reliance on spiritual and supernatural explanations for misfortune, potentially intensifying belief-based violence (African Child Forum, 2021; Spanò, 2023). While overall crime rates declined during lockdowns, ritual crimes—often hidden or culturally justified—may have persisted or even increased, particularly against vulnerable populations such as children (Owusu, 2025a, 2025b). Understanding these pandemic-related shifts is essential for developing effective, time-sensitive interventions.

6. Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend deprivation and conflict theories by demonstrating how structural inequalities interact with cultural belief systems to produce ritual violence. While deprivation theories emphasize the role of economic strain in motivating crime, the findings suggest that cultural and ideological factors mediate this relationship, providing justification and normalization for violent acts. Additionally, the study contributes to social control theory by highlighting how weak institutional oversight and limited law enforcement capacity allow ritual crimes to persist. The findings also align with social learning theory, as group dynamics and collective identity play a critical role in reinforcing and transmitting ritualized behaviors across communities and generations.

7. Comparison with Previous Research

Previous research on ritual crime has often focused on individual cases or specific geographic regions. This study builds on that foundation by synthesizing findings across multiple regions—Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America—to identify common patterns. The findings confirm earlier research on the role of supernatural beliefs (Owusu, 2025a, 2025b; Tade & Akeredolu, 2022) while extending understanding by showing how structural conditions and institutional



weaknesses interact with belief systems. The study also extends previous work by examining the impact of COVID-19 on ritual crime patterns, a relatively underexplored area in the literature. These contributions highlight the importance of a holistic, multi-level approach to understanding and addressing ritual crime.

8. Policy Implications

The findings of this study have several important policy implications for addressing ritual crime at multiple levels:

1. Strengthening Law Enforcement Capacity: Research shows that police often face significant challenges in investigating and prosecuting ritual killings due to limited forensic capacity, weak legal frameworks, and lack of community cooperation (Maringa & Mulaudzi, 2025). Specialized training for law enforcement on ritual crime identification, investigation, and prosecution is essential. This should include cultural awareness training to help officers understand the belief systems that motivate these crimes while maintaining a commitment to human rights and legal accountability.

2. Improving Legal Frameworks: Many countries lack specific legal classifications for ritual crimes, making prosecution difficult (Madfis, 2020). Governments should develop clear legal definitions of ritual crime and establish appropriate penalties. International cooperation and legal harmonization would help address the transnational nature of some ritual crimes and improve cross-border investigations.

3. Victim Protection and Support: Given that children and other vulnerable populations are disproportionately targeted, strengthening child protection policies and social services is critical (Owusu, 2025b; Amnesty International, 2025). This includes increasing access to education, healthcare, and social support for at-risk communities, as well as establishing safe reporting mechanisms for victims and witnesses.

4. Community Education and Awareness: Addressing harmful superstitions and cultural beliefs that justify ritual violence requires community-based education and awareness programs. These programs should engage religious and community leaders to challenge harmful practices while respecting cultural traditions. Public awareness campaigns can help communities recognize and report ritual crimes.

5. Addressing Structural Conditions: Because ritual crime is linked to poverty and economic desperation, addressing underlying socioeconomic inequalities is essential (Williams, 2022). Investments in education, economic development, and social services can reduce the conditions that make individuals vulnerable to both offending and victimization.

6. Strengthening International Cooperation: Given the global nature of some ritual crimes and the varying legal frameworks across countries, international cooperation is critical. This includes information sharing, joint investigations, and harmonization of legal definitions and penalties.

7. Research and Data Collection: Improving data collection and research on ritual crime is essential for understanding its scope, patterns, and effective interventions. Governments and international organizations should invest in research infrastructure and support primary data collection in affected regions.

9. Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the study relied heavily on secondary data, which may be influenced by underreporting and inconsistencies in how ritual crimes are documented across regions. Second, the sensitive and often hidden nature of ritual crime makes it difficult to capture the full scope of the issue. Additionally, the focus on specific geographic and cultural contexts may limit the applicability of the findings. Third, the reliance on English-language sources only may have excluded important research published in other languages, particularly from non-Western countries where ritual crimes are prevalent. Fourth, the study lacks victim-centered perspectives, as the analysis focused primarily on offender behavior and structural conditions. Fifth, the inclusion of one older source (Berry, 2012) may not fully reflect contemporary understandings of ritual crime, although its foundational theoretical insights provide important context. Future research would benefit from incorporating primary data collection and localized case studies to provide a more in-depth understanding. Longitudinal studies tracking ritual crime trends over time, including before and after COVID-19, would provide critical insights into how the pandemic may have reshaped these offenses.



10. Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding of ritual crime by examining how socioeconomic inequality, cultural belief systems, and institutional limitations interact to influence both offending patterns and victimization. The findings demonstrate that ritual crime is not simply the result of individual behavior or isolated cultural practices, but rather a product of broader structural conditions. These conditions include poverty, limited access to education, and weak criminal justice responses. These factors not only shape motivations for offending but also contribute to the vulnerability of certain populations.

A key contribution of this research is the emphasis on the role of institutional weaknesses, particularly in law enforcement, in allowing ritual crimes to persist. Challenges such as underreporting, limited investigative capacity, and lack of specialized training reduce the effectiveness of legal responses and contribute to ongoing impunity. Addressing these gaps is critical for improving both prevention and accountability. The study also highlights the importance of understanding ritual crime in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have intensified belief-based violence through economic hardship, social isolation, and weakened institutional oversight.

While this study successfully identified key patterns and relationships, limitations related to data availability and the hidden nature of ritual crime highlight the need for further research. Future studies should focus on primary data collection, localized case analyses, and the long-term impact of targeted interventions. Comparative studies across regions with different legal frameworks and cultural contexts would also be valuable, as would research on the effectiveness of specific prevention and intervention strategies. Research incorporating victim perspectives and survivor experiences is urgently needed to fully understand the human cost of these crimes. Overall, reducing ritual crime will require a comprehensive approach that combines stronger criminal justice responses with efforts to address underlying social and economic inequalities. The persistence of ritual crime reflects not only individual pathology but also systemic failures that demand coordinated action at local, national, and international levels.

STATEMENTS

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study is a systematic literature review and does not involve primary data collection from human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data analysed were derived from previously published peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and grey literature available in the public domain. No ethical approval was required for this research.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study does not involve human participants, surveys, interviews, or any form of primary data collection that would require informed consent. The research is based exclusively on the analysis of existing published literature and publicly available documents.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any person's data, images, or identifiable information. All authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Data Availability Statement

All data analysed during this systematic review are included in this published article. The search strategy, eligibility criteria, and data extraction protocols are fully documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The data-extraction workbook used during the review process is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No primary data were collected, and no datasets were generated or analysed beyond those reported in the included studies.

Authors' Individual Contributions

Makari Carter contributed to the conceptualization and methodology of the study, carried out data collection and analysis, and prepared the original manuscript.

Praveenrao Bolli (Corresponding Author) contributed to the conceptualization, provided theoretical guidance and supervision, critically



revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval for submission.

Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be fully accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors declare that ChatGPT (GPT-5.5-mini) was used in some cases solely for language-related assistance, including grammar checking, spelling correction, and improving manuscript clarity and readability. Generative AI was not used to develop research ideas or contribute to the substantive intellectual content of the manuscript. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the research and the final manuscript.

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