

Organisational Culture and Knowledge Sharing in South African Higher Education: A Mixed-methods Study in Information Technology Departments

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Abstract: This paper examines the influence of organisational culture on knowledge sharing in Information Technology departments at a South African university. Amid cultural and structural barriers in higher education, it explores cultural enablers and barriers and proposes strategies to strengthen collaboration. A mixed-methods design combined the Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) with semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from academic staff in three IT departments between October and December 2023. Quantitative results indicated dominant Hierarchy cultures in two departments and a mixed Clan–Market orientation in the third, with all preferring more Clan and Adhocracy values. Interviews revealed that while formal channels exist, informal mentoring, peer discussions are the most valued channels. Barriers included professional competition, siloed structures, and rigid procedures. Conducted at a single institution with a modest sample size, findings are not statistically generalisable but offer rich contextual insights for similar higher education settings. Future research should extend the study across multiple institutions and disciplines to validate and broaden applicability. While organisational culture and knowledge sharing are globally well-documented, limited research exists on their intersection in South African higher education, particularly within IT departments. This study contributes context-specific evidence, integrating cultural diagnostics with practical recommendations to improve knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Organisational culture, Higher education, South Africa

1. Introduction

The rise of the knowledge-driven economy has intensified the importance of effective knowledge management. In today's connected and data-rich environment, knowledge management enables organisations to capture, share, and leverage intellectual assets to enhance innovation, and competitiveness (Gelbman, 2021; Rubenstein-Montano *et al.*, 2001; Santoro *et al.*, 2018). Davenport and Prusak (2000); Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) define knowledge management as acquiring, capturing, storing, and disseminating knowledge and skills to enhance decision-making and organisational performance. Within the same vein AlQhtani (2025); Rehman *et al.* (2021) mentions that knowledge management involves how an organisation creates, learns, enhances, shares, organises and utilises knowledge to improve on organisational innovativeness, efficiency, and overall performance of the organisation. In the context of universities, knowledge management refers to the systems and processes that are put in place to help researchers and educators work together to share ideas and information through the use of modern technology to collect, record, and disseminate knowledge, therefore making it easier to apply knowledge and understand it, in turn improving the quality and impact of educational research. AlQhtani (2025) supports this point by defining knowledge management in universities as a university's strategic effort to achieve a competitive advantage, by collecting and investing intellectual assets to help staff members work better therefore improving the quality of work produced and improving overall productivity. Knowledge management practices are deeply integrated into organisational culture, as knowledge management practices play a crucial role in fostering organisational culture elements such as shared assumptions, values, beliefs, that influence how employees interact, make decisions and perceive their role within the organisation. Organisational culture influences these processes by determining how knowledge is perceived, valued, and shared within the organisation (Alavi & Leidner, 2012).

The effectiveness of knowledge management is closely intertwined with organisational culture, which shapes how knowledge is created, shared, and applied (Alavi & Leidner, 2006; Taleghani & Talebian, 2013). Schein (1999) defines culture as shared values guiding behaviour, while Abdelrahman *et al.* (2025) broadens this to include collective knowledge and customs. A supportive culture fosters trust and collaboration, whereas a resistant culture impedes it (Aichouche *et al.*, 2022; Cai & Ma, 2022; Jasimuddin & Saci, 2022). In the South African context siloed structures, cultural resistance, and limited technology adoptions hinder knowledge sharing (Masenya, 2024; Ramjeawon & Rowley, 2020). Various authors have discussed organisational culture in multiple ways Schein (1985) discusses culture in terms of leadership and layered structure. Deal and Kennedy

(2000) discuss organisational culture as the way people act in a company based on the feedback and risk Harrison and Stokes (1992) discuss organisational culture in terms of the hierarchical levels that exist in organisations such as formalisation and centralisation. This study uses the organisational culture model by Cameron and Quinn (2011) as it is a validated tool that has been used by over 10,000 companies. It helps to measure employee satisfaction by evaluating the difference between the current and desired culture; it is adaptable and can be written to suit different industries.

This study examines how organisational culture influences knowledge sharing practices in a South African tertiary institution, it identifies cultural enablers and barriers, and provides practical recommendations for enhancing knowledge sharing. The central research question guiding this investigation is:

What influence does organisational culture have on knowledge sharing practices in a South African tertiary institution?

2. Literature Review

Tertiary or higher education institutions have experienced a significant growth in knowledge content, both tacit and explicit, in the knowledge-based era (Alves & Pinheiro, 2022; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Ortiz-Barrera, 2023; Rexwhite & Okeoghene, 2025). Recent research confirms this trend, noting that global collaboration, digital transformation, and knowledge-intensive academic work have accelerated the creation and exchange of both tacit and explicit knowledge. Al-Kurdi *et al.* (2020) highlight that tacit knowledge expansion is driven by collaborative research and informal exchanges, while explicit knowledge growth is supported by institutional repositories and online platforms. Similarly, Fullwood *et al.* (2013) report a surge in explicit knowledge outputs through digital publishing and open-access repositories, yet emphasise that tacit knowledge remains more difficult to share due to cultural and individual barriers. Annansingh *et al.* (2018) further note that cloud-based learning environments have enhanced the storage, retrieval, and sharing of explicit knowledge, while also providing collaborative spaces that support tacit knowledge exchange.

Knowledge management has been the focus of considerable research since the 1990s (Davenport & Prusak, 2000), but it remains less explored in the higher education sector. Scholars such as Maponya (2005) and Shattock (2010) note that universities, as multifaceted and multiproduct organisations, are increasingly taking on new roles in the knowledge economy. Higher education institutions operate as knowledge businesses, actively involved in knowledge creation, dissemination, and learning (Mazorodze & Mkhize, 2024; Rowley, 2000), making the strategic application of knowledge management essential to achieving institutional goals (Kidwell *et al.*, 2000; Ramakrishnan & Yasin, 2012). Effective knowledge management in this sector has been linked to improvements in teaching and research quality, retention of high-performing academics, curriculum development, and cost efficiency (Fernandez-Lopez *et al.*, 2018; Quarchioni *et al.*, 2020; Rowley, 2000).

Within higher education, knowledge sharing is regarded as central to knowledge management strategies (Hislop, 2018), as it enhances the value and impact of knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Academic staff develop knowledge through research and disseminate it via teaching, publications, and industry collaborations (Fullwood & Rowley, 2017). Despite these opportunities, knowledge sharing success in higher education is not guaranteed, with Ahmad *et al.* (2023); Al-Kurdi *et al.* (2014); Cronin (2001); attributing some of the challenges to the absence of a cohesive academic culture comparable to that found in corporate environments. Benefits of effective knowledge sharing include improved competitiveness for research funding, faster research progress, enhanced technology-assisted teaching, and more coordinated strategic planning (Afolayan, 2022; Nassuora, 2011; Muhidin *et al.* 2022; Sekli & De La Vega, 2021; Sivagnanam *et al.*, 2023). However, these benefits are only realised when institutions foster a culture that encourages openness and the exchange of expertise (Afolayan, 2022; Al-Kurdi *et al.*, 2018; Maponya, 2005).

The relationship between organisational culture and knowledge sharing is well documented (Alavi & Leidner, 2006; Jasimuddin & Saci, 2022). Culture shapes how knowledge is created, valued, and shared by framing social interaction (De Long and Fahey, 2000) and influencing both individual willingness and effectiveness of sharing initiatives (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; Lopez *et al.*, 2004). After leadership, culture is a critical success factor for knowledge management, highlighting the need to address cultural dynamics.

In the South African higher education context, empirical evidence shows that entrenched cultural and technological barriers hinder knowledge sharing. Veer Ramjeawon and Rowley (2020) document how siloed structures, lack of incentives, and cultural resistance act as barriers to effective knowledge management in universities. Masenya (2024) similarly highlights that even within academic libraries, limited adoption of modern technologies and persistent knowledge hoarding impede the effective diffusion of knowledge. An adoption study

by Mazorodze and Mkhize (2022), found that poor infrastructure, lack of trust, absence of incentives, inadequate training, and weak organisational culture remain significant impediments to knowledge-sharing efforts in South African universities, recommending an integrated framework to address these issues. A comparative study between South Africa and Mauritius (Ramjeawon & Rowley, 2020) also confirmed that while leadership and technology act as enablers, deep-rooted cultural barriers persist.

Despite the global and local recognition of the importance of knowledge management and knowledge sharing in higher education, the literature reveals that South African tertiary institutions continue to face entrenched barriers that limit effective knowledge exchange. Studies have identified persistent cultural challenges such as siloed structures, turf protection, individualistic behaviour, and a lack of trust, alongside structural and technological constraints including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient incentives, and limited training. While several frameworks have been proposed to address these issues, empirical research specifically examining the interplay between organisational culture and knowledge sharing practices within South African higher education remains limited. This gap is significant, as understanding how cultural factors enable or hinder knowledge sharing is essential for developing targeted strategies to improve collaboration, research innovation, and institutional performance.

Addressing this gap, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of organisational culture on knowledge sharing practices in a South African tertiary institution. By identifying cultural enablers and barriers, the study aims to provide practical recommendations that can strengthen knowledge sharing and contribute to the broader discourse on knowledge management in higher education.

3. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods case study design. Primary data from semi-structured interviews with academic staff from three IT departments explored the barriers and enablers to knowledge sharing. A supplementary quantitative component used the OCAI (Cameron & Quinn, 1999) to capture current and preferred cultural profile across six organisational dimensions. Participants allocated points across four cultural types, Clan, Adhocracy, Market, and Hierarchy, reflecting current and preferred culture. Table 1 depicts the methodological process.

Table 1: Research Methodology

Component	Description
Research Design	This qualitative-dominant mixed-methods case study explored cultural enablers and barriers to knowledge sharing through semi-structured interviews, while the OCAI provides a cultural profile for triangulation.
Population and Sampling	The study targeted academic staff from three departments in a higher education institution. Purposive and convenience sampling procedures were used based on the availability and relevance of the target population. Both sampling methods were used for questionnaires and interviews. 32 out of the 77 participants took part in the study therefore resulting in a response rate of 42%.
Qualitative Data Collection	Semi-structured online interviews explored perceptions of organisational culture, barriers and enablers to knowledge sharing, and the relationship between culture and collaboration.
Quantitative Data Collection	Participants completed a condensed OCAI questionnaire allocating 100 points across four cultural descriptions (Clan, Adhocracy, Market, Hierarchy) within six organisational dimensions to identify the current cultural profile.
Data Analysis – Qualitative and Quantitative	The quantitative data identified the current and desired culture across all three departments and the qualitative data provided the different perceptions that exist on organisational culture, both data were compared for themes and trends and integrated with literature during interpretations. The integration of the two methods helped produce a more nuanced view on the factors that influence knowledge sharing within a South African higher education institution.
Ethical Considerations	Ethical clearance obtained from the university's research ethics committee (Reference number: EBIT/62/2023). All participants gave informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.
Validity and Reliability	Methodological triangulation using interviews and OCAI results enhanced credibility, while member checking validated qualitative themes. A pilot study was conducted with one staff member from the School of IT who participated in both the interview and questionnaire to identify challenges in question comprehension and time requirements. The findings from the pilot study were not used in the actual study results.

4. Results

This section discusses findings from the OCAI and qualitative data, presented by department and synthesised across all departments. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities.

4.1 Department A

Quantitative findings

The results indicate that the current dominant culture in Department A is *Hierarchy* (31 points), followed by *Market* (10 points), *Adhocracy* (5 points), and *Clan* (2 points). The preferred dominant culture is *Clan* (25 points), then *Adhocracy* (14 points), *Hierarchy* (7 points), and *Market* (2 points). Indicating a shift from a rigid structure toward a more collaborative, trust-based culture. Figure 1 below visualises these differences.

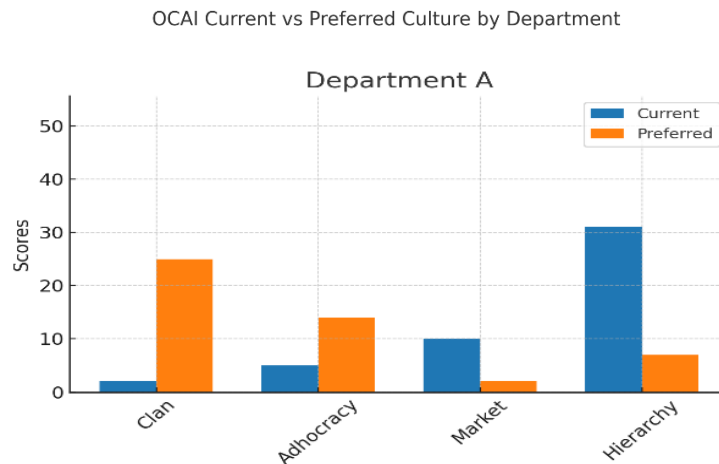


Figure 1: Current vs preferred organisational culture – Department A

Qualitative Insights

Participants strongly desired a more collaborative environment:

“It feels like decisions are made far away from the people doing the actual work.” (Lerato)

“We follow the rules well, but sometimes it stops us from being creative.” (Kabelo)

Several noted that formal procedures are important but should not replace open discussion:

“We need spaces where you can bounce ideas around without a set agenda, that’s when you get the best cross-pollination.” (Thandiwe)

4.2 Department B

Quantitative findings

Department B shows a mixed current dominant culture of *Clan* (14 points) and *Market* (14 points), with lower scores for *Adhocracy* (8 points) and *Hierarchy* (6 points). The preferred culture is predominantly *Clan* (18 points), with *Adhocracy* (12 points) as the second choice, indicating a desire for greater flexibility and collaboration over competition. Figure 2 illustrates the current and preferred culture profiles, highlighting the reduction in market culture preference and the strengthening of the clan orientation.

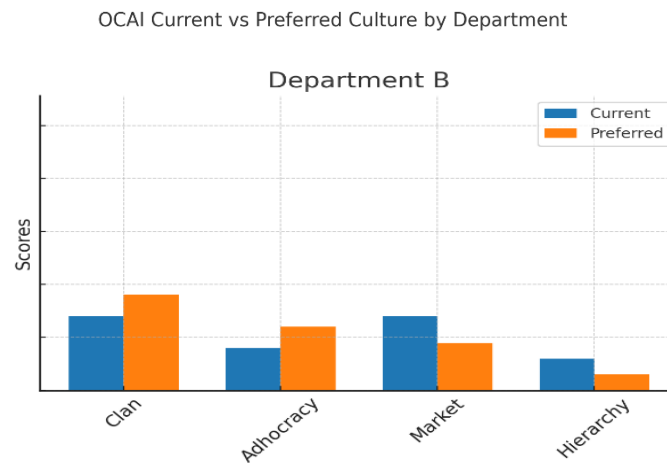


Figure 2: Current vs preferred organisational culture – Department B

Qualitative Insights

Trust was a recurring theme.

“If you’re worried someone might claim your idea, you’ll keep it to yourself until it’s ready to publish.” (Sipho)

“The culture is shaped at the top. If leaders encourage collaboration, it filters down. If they reward competition, that’s what people focus on.” (Michael)

Some participants highlighted the tension between research competitiveness and knowledge sharing:

“We all want to win research grants, but it sometimes feels like we’re competing against each other instead of working together.” (Naledi)

4.3 Department C

Quantitative findings

The current dominant culture in Department C is *Hierarchy* (53 points), with much lower scores for *Clan* (26 points), *Market* (13 points), and *Adhocracy* (10 points). The preferred culture is *Clan* (38 points), closely followed by *Adhocracy* (37 points), suggesting a significant aspiration toward a participative and innovative environment. These findings are depicted in Figure 3.

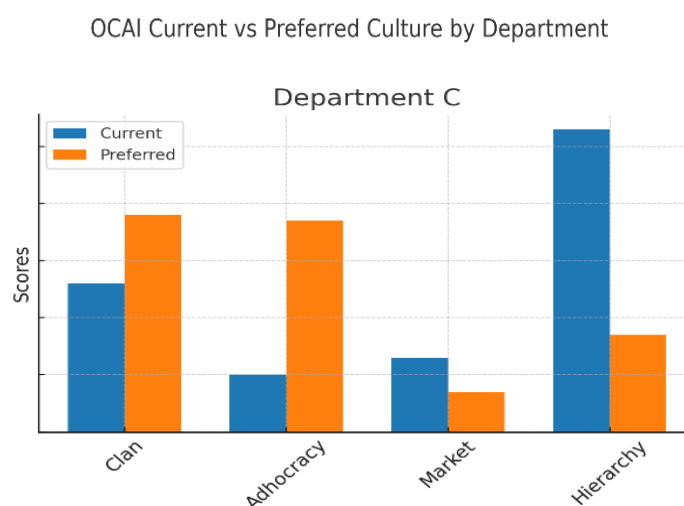


Figure 3: Current vs preferred organisational culture – Department C

Qualitative Insights

Barriers included outdated systems and formal processes:

"The systems we have aren't intuitive. Even if you want to share a document, it can be frustrating enough that you just don't bother." (Lesedi)

"We need to know that sharing an unfinished thought won't be used against us in performance reviews." (Zanele)

There was also a strong appetite for innovation:

"We should be at the forefront of ideas, not just following procedures." (Priya)

4.4 Cross-department Themes

Several themes emerged across departments:

Leadership and Cultural Tone

"When leaders make time to join informal discussions, it sends a message that those conversations matter." (Lindiwe, Dept A)

"If leaders encourage collaboration, it filters down." (Michael, Dept B)

Trust and Psychological Safety

"We need to know that sharing an unfinished thought won't be used against us." (Zanele, Dept C)

"If you're worried someone might claim your idea, you'll keep it to yourself." (Sipho, Dept B)

Technology and Systems

"Sometimes it's faster to walk over and hand someone a printout than to upload it to the system." (Nomsa, Dept B)

Desire for Informal Collaboration Spaces

"Even virtual 'coffee chats' could help us connect across projects and disciplines." (Priya, Dept C)

Across all three departments, the quantitative data shows a clear shift in preference from hierarchy and market-oriented cultures toward clan and adhocracy cultures, reflecting a desire for greater collaboration, trust, flexibility, and innovation.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate the complex interplay between organisational culture and knowledge sharing practices across three academic departments in a South African university. The OCAI results revealed dominant Hierarchy cultures in Departments A and C, and a mixed Clan–Market orientation in Department B. However, interviews indicated a strong preference across all departments for more collaborative and innovative environments, particularly Clan and Adhocracy cultures. This reflects Quinn and Cameron's (2011) argument that organisations frequently display hybrid cultural profiles, but that misalignments between current and preferred cultures often signal the need for deliberate cultural transformation.

5.1 Alignment and Gaps Between Current and Preferred Cultures

Across the three departments, participants expressed a clear preference for Clan values; trust, openness, and teamwork, with Department C also favouring Adhocracy traits such as innovation and flexibility. This pattern aligns with research by De Long and Fahey (2000) and Aichouche *et al.* (2022), which shows that Clan and Adhocracy cultures typically foster openness, collaboration, and effective knowledge sharing, whereas Hierarchy cultures, despite their efficiency, often limit informal and cross-boundary exchange.

In the South African higher education context, similar trends have been reported. Veer Ramjeawon and Rowley (2020) found that rigid, hierarchical procedures in universities can restrict agility and innovation, while collaborative, trust-based cultures improve the diffusion of both tacit and explicit knowledge. The gap between current and desired cultures in this study exceeded the 10-point threshold across all departments, suggesting a significant appetite for change, particularly in Department C, where the shift from a heavily procedural hierarchy to a more flexible, participative model was most pronounced.

5.2 Knowledge Sharing in Practice

Interview data revealed that while formal tools like email, and institutional platforms such as ClickUP (Institutional learning management system), Teams, and WhatsApp are used, the most valued knowledge occurs informally; through mentoring, peer discussions, and collaborative research. This supports Fullwood and Rowley (2017) and Maponya (2005), on the importance of informal networks. However, professional competition around research outputs and promotions limit openness, echoing Masenya's (2024) observation that knowledge hoarding can persist under dominant competitive performance metrics.

As "Fatima" (Department B) reflected: *"We work well together, but sometimes the push for measurable outputs overshadows creativity."* Similarly, "Sibongile" (Department C) noted: *"There's little room for trying new methods; everything has to follow the handbook."*

These comments reinforce Davenport and Prusak (2000), warning that over-formalisation and excessive standardisation can suppress innovativeness and the free flow of ideas.

5.3 Influencing Factors: Trust and Competition

Trust was a key enabler of knowledge sharing, while professional competition and siloed structures were barriers. This aligns with Lee *et al.* (2006) and Goh (2002), on trust as a prerequisite for collaboration. In South Africa Veer Ramjeawon and Rowley (2020) link trust deficits and entrenched silos to weakened knowledge-sharing cultures.

Participants in this study indicated that teaching-related knowledge is more openly shared than research-related knowledge. "Lerato" (Department A) explained: *"It feels like decisions are made far away from the people doing the actual work."*

This reflects the top-down decision-making typical of Hierarchy cultures, which Cameron and Quinn (2011) note can discourage discretionary and informal sharing.

5.4 Opportunities for Enhancing Knowledge Sharing

Participants proposed interventions like round-table discussions, brown-bag sessions, research days, and cross-level mentorship. These align with literature on formal and informal sharing forums (Al-Alawi *et al.*, 2007; Fong & Chu, 2006; Gundu *et al.*, 2025). Communities of practice (Alzoubi *et al.*, 2022; Clark *et al.*, 2023; Wenger, 1998) and peer-led spaces also enhance tacit knowledge transfer and collaboration in higher education.

When triangulated, the qualitative and quantitative findings point toward a dual focus for improvement: addressing structural and procedural barriers while actively cultivating the trust, openness, and risk tolerance associated with Clan and Adhocracy cultures. This cultural shift could help reconcile the tension between efficiency-driven processes and the need for creativity and cross-boundary collaboration.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and corroborating literature, several actions are proposed to strengthen knowledge sharing in South African tertiary institutions:

1. Cultivate a Trust-Based, Collaborative Culture: Institutions should prioritise building interpersonal trust and openness through transparent decision-making and inclusive dialogue forums. Trust has been shown to significantly increase willingness to share knowledge (Goh, 2002; Wang *et al.*, 2015).
2. Introduce Cultural Elements that Foster Innovation: Departments with predominantly hierarchical structures could integrate aspects of Adhocracy culture, allowing flexibility in teaching and research practices, thereby encouraging creative problem-solving (Quinn & Cameron, 2011).
3. Expand Informal Knowledge-Sharing Opportunities: Establish informal forums such as research cafés, brown-bag sessions, and Communities of Practice to encourage spontaneous exchange of ideas across roles and departments (Al-Alawi *et al.*, 2007; Wenger, 1998).
4. Strengthen Mentorship and Cross-Departmental Collaboration: Implement structured mentorship schemes and cross-disciplinary projects to break down silos, ensuring both tacit and explicit knowledge is effectively transferred.
5. Embed Knowledge Sharing into Performance and Recognition Systems: Recognise and reward collaborative contributions in annual performance reviews and promotion criteria, signalling that knowledge sharing is a valued institutional behaviour.

6. Enhance Digital Platforms for Collaboration: Upgrade existing platforms (e.g., ClickUP, Teams) to better support resource sharing and collaborative work, complemented by targeted training to address technological barriers.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of organisational culture on knowledge sharing practices within a South African tertiary institution, revealing a complex interplay between cultural orientation, structural conditions, and individual behaviours. The findings demonstrate that while formal mechanisms and digital tools facilitate information exchange, the depth and quality of knowledge sharing are strongly shaped by cultural values. Hierarchical cultures, as observed in two of the departments, provide stability and efficiency but can limit informal, trust-based exchanges. In contrast, the preferred shift toward Clan and Adhocracy cultures reflects a collective desire for greater collaboration, openness, and innovation.

The alignment between these preferences and literature underscores that fostering trust, reducing procedural rigidity, and creating opportunities for informal engagement are critical to enhancing knowledge sharing in academic environments. Importantly, the South African higher education context presents additional challenges, including siloed structures, professional competition, and technological barriers, which must be addressed for sustainable improvement. By strategically reshaping organisational culture and embedding knowledge sharing into institutional systems and values, tertiary institutions can not only improve internal collaboration but also strengthen their capacity for research, innovation, and societal impact.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee.

AI Declaration: No AI tools were used to generate the content of this paper.

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