

Case Study

Advancing inclusive mentorship and psychology in entrepreneurship

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Abstract

The AIM (Advancing Inclusive Mentorship Programs for Higher Education Level) project was designed to address the underrepresentation of diverse groups in entrepreneurship by promoting inclusive mentorship practices across various industries. This study provides an in-depth analysis of the project's key activities and results, including the development of tailored mentoring programs, the implementation of surveys to assess mentorship experiences, webinars and the outcomes of a broad Mentorship Program. Out of 114 participants, the results demonstrate the positive impact of inclusive mentorship on mentees' entrepreneurial journeys, highlighting improvements in skill development, confidence, and access to resources. The study also identifies best practices for mentors and organizations to support diverse entrepreneurs effectively. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on diversity and inclusion in entrepreneurship, offering practical recommendations for enhancing mentorship programs globally.

Keywords Inclusive mentorship · Entrepreneurship · Diversity · Mentoring programs · Skill development · AIM project · Training sessions · Entrepreneurial inclusion · Diverse entrepreneurs · Best practices

1 Introduction

Inclusion in mentorship practices, particularly within entrepreneurship, has increasingly been recognized by the European Commission [1], as essential for addressing the structural barriers faced by underrepresented groups. According to Clutterbuck [2], effective mentorship promotes talent by providing tailored support that helps mentees navigate the entrepreneurial landscape. Eby and Allen [3] highlight the motivational aspects of mentoring relationships, which are critical for marginalized entrepreneurs. Recent studies from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [4] and the Kauffman Foundation [5], emphasize the success of mentorship programs in promoting inclusive entrepreneurship by facilitating access to resources and networks. These findings inform the framework of the AIM project, which builds on existing knowledge to create a comprehensive mentorship model for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Inclusive entrepreneurship, as we have decided to define it within the AIM project, refers to the process of enabling individuals from diverse and traditionally underrepresented backgrounds to start their own business. The AIM project's main target groups are ethnic minorities and individuals who face significant barriers to entrepreneurship due to their socioeconomic status. By promoting entrepreneurial inclusion, the project aims to increase the percentage of university students who realize their entrepreneurial potential within 5 years of completing their studies. The AIM project introduces an Inclusive Entrepreneurship Mentorship Model (IEMM), which reflects the specific context of each country while aligning with the broader European landscape. Its main objectives are to equip students with the necessary skillset to

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transform innovative ideas into start-ups, provide high-quality internships through collaboration between universities and employers, offer mentorship and one-on-one feedback, and conduct training in presentation skills and pitch preparation. Through its mentorship program, the AIM project addresses the unique challenges faced by underrepresented entrepreneurs, providing them with the tools, resources, and networks necessary for success.

The primary goal of the project is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the AIM project's Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Model (IEMM) in promoting entrepreneurship among underrepresented groups through inclusive mentorship practices. This article provides a detailed overview of both the development of the AIM project's training and mentorship programs and the results achieved, using data from training sessions, mentorship relationships, and surveys. By detailing the processes involved in designing and implementing these initiatives, the study highlights best practices and offers insights into their impact on mentees in different countries. The analysis also includes data on how mentorship has influenced entrepreneurial skills, confidence, and access to resources.

Mentorship goes beyond skill development; it plays a crucial role in shaping the mental frameworks that underlie entrepreneurial behavior. By building mentees' self-efficacy and helping them overcome cognitive barriers such as fear of failure and imposter syndrome, inclusive mentorship becomes a powerful psychological tool. DuBois and Karcher [6] suggest that effective mentorship can transform mentees' belief systems, fostering confidence, resilience, and a growth mindset. Thus, the AIM project not only advances entrepreneurship but also promotes psychological empowerment in underrepresented groups, creating long-lasting mental frameworks conducive to success.

The AIM project was implemented across four countries: Sweden, Portugal, Austria, and Bulgaria. These countries were selected due to their diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems, representing different regions of Europe: northern, western, central, and eastern. This cross-country comparative perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how inclusive mentorship practices can be adapted to different socio-economic and cultural contexts. By comparing outcomes across these regions, the project seeks to identify both common challenges and region-specific strategies for promoting inclusive entrepreneurship.

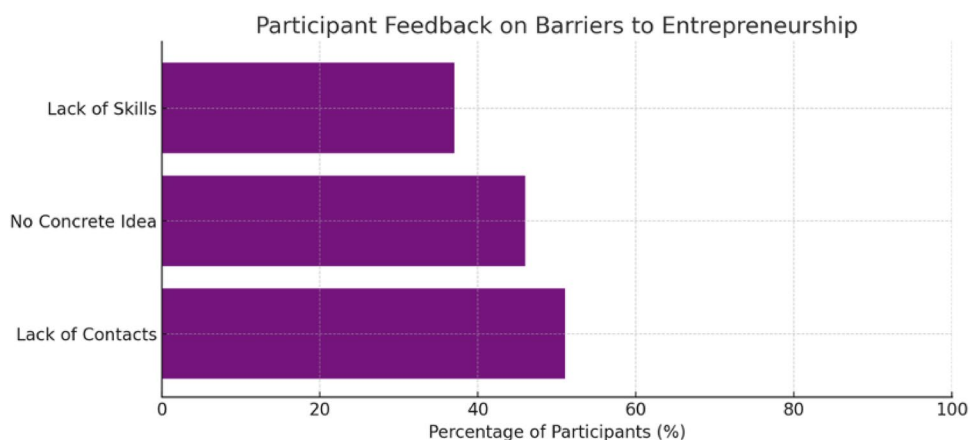
2 Methodology

The AIM project employed a mixed-methods approach to analyze the impact of inclusive mentorship practices on aspiring entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups. The study combined qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and outcomes.

Two surveys have been conducted with a total of 114 participants. One survey was held face to face (39 participants) and the other survey was conducted Online (75 participants) to understand the participants' aspirations and hurdles they face in their mind when thinking in developing and launching a new business (Fig. 1). Participants were recruited through partner universities and local networks, ensuring a representative sample of aspiring entrepreneurs from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The sampling method was purposive, focusing on individuals who identified as ethnic minorities or faced significant barriers to entrepreneurship.

The findings revealed key barriers faced by aspiring entrepreneurs:

Fig. 1 Survey to assess participants' aspirations and hurdles they face in starting a business



- 51% of respondents identified the lack of necessary contacts as a significant obstacle;
- 46% indicated that the absence of a concrete business idea hindered their entrepreneurial aspirations;
- 37% highlighted insufficient information and skills as key challenges.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with mentors and mentees, focusing on their experiences and the perceived benefits of the Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Model (IEMM). A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns and insights, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure changes in entrepreneurial skills, confidence, and access to resources. The AIM project employed a multifaceted approach to promote inclusive mentorship. Portugal, Sweden, Austria, and Bulgaria were chosen for their diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems and varying levels of representation in entrepreneurship. These contrasts allowed the project to analyze context-specific challenges and successes in inclusive mentorship across Europe. Two primary components were included: Training sessions via webinars and Mentoring Programs.

- **Training sessions and webinars:** the project also organized training sessions and webinars for both mentors and mentees. These sessions focused on enhancing mentoring skills, understanding the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, and promoting best practices for inclusive mentorship;
- **Mentoring Programs:** a series of mentoring programs were developed to connect experienced entrepreneurs with mentees from diverse backgrounds. These programs were designed to address specific needs identified through initial surveys and consultations with stakeholders.

These insights clearly show the significant interest in entrepreneurship and the critical barriers that need to be addressed.

2.1 Training sessions via webinars

From September 2023 to April 2024, a series of webinars provided aspiring entrepreneurs with insights into essential aspects of entrepreneurship. Topics ranged from cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset and integrating sustainability into business models to navigating the ideation process and applying for European grants. The webinars also covered resource management, financial literacy, and strategies for building sustainable companies. Baron and Shane [7] emphasize the importance of practical guidance on launching and scaling startups, optimizing resource utilization, and promoting collaboration within entrepreneurial ecosystems was shared. These sessions drew consistent participation, reflecting a strong interest in entrepreneurial development, and offered participants the opportunity to enhance their skills and deepen their understanding of key business principles.

To assess the impact of all webinars, participants were asked to fill out evaluation forms at the conclusion of each session. The response was highly encouraging, with an average of 20 attendees per session and over 50% completing the evaluation forms. The feedback gathered indicated a resounding success, highlighting participants' high levels of engagement and a genuine eagerness to acquire knowledge in entrepreneurship. The practical relevance of the information shared during these sessions was underscored, emphasizing the significant demand for such initiatives to support and empower aspiring entrepreneurs.

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines from the Research Ethics Council at University of Gävle, as set forward by the research ethics and good research practice at the University of Gävle.

2.2 Mentoring programs

In May 2023, two impactful training sessions were organized. The first training session, titled "What are the Qualities of a Good Mentor", took place in Gävle, Sweden.

This session focused on the essential qualities and attributes that make a mentor effective in guiding and supporting mentees. Participants had the opportunity to explore various mentorship models, communication techniques, and strategies for fostering a positive mentor–mentee relationship. The second training course, titled "What is AIM Project: Results of the AIM Survey," occurred on May 5 th, 2023 in Uppsala, Sweden. This session provided an in-depth overview of the AIM project, presenting findings and insights gathered from the AIM survey. Attendees were immersed in understanding the project's goals, methodologies, and the impact it seeks to make within the context of inclusive mentorship. The course also offered a platform for discussing the survey results, enabling participants to actively engage in the project's

outcomes. Both sessions were designed to empower staff and students with practical knowledge, fostering a supportive and inclusive mentorship environment within the academic community.

Another dynamic presentation was held in Uppsala as part of a series of similar activities conducted across the project partners' countries, including Vienna (Austria), Évora (Portugal), and Sofia (Bulgaria). These sessions shared the same structure and objectives, focused on "Entrepreneurship Having a Mentor".

This session not only explored the essence of mentorship but also identified mentors and mentees within the program. Mentees were assigned practical tasks ranging from creating business guides to exploring grant opportunities. This hands-on approach allowed mentees to gain real-world experience and insights, fostering a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship. The assigned tasks for mentees encompassed diverse areas, including creating a comprehensive guide on how to open a company in Sweden (covering all steps, costs, and time), determining the optimal location in Europe to establish and remotely manage a company, understanding the certification process for a product such as a breathing analyzer in Sweden, exploring available grants for startups in Sweden, conceptualizing an effective reward system for startups, and evaluating the factors that influence young individuals when deciding between a job in a startup versus a multinational corporation. The mentees were further instructed to develop their tasks and prepare short presentations to be delivered at the end of the subsequent webinar, promoting a dynamic learning and sharing environment. This structured approach aligns with Rhodes and Spencer [8], who emphasize the importance of trust and goal-oriented guidance in maximizing the benefits of mentoring relationships.

Mentees expressed gratitude for the invaluable guidance and support they received from their mentors, highlighting the positive impact the program had on their personal and professional growth. The most frequently mentioned words by the mentees included guidance, confidence and mutual learning.

3 Impact of inclusive mentorship on mentees

The implementation of the Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Model (IEMM) yielded notable outcomes in the development of entrepreneurial skills, self-efficacy, and confidence among mentees. A mixed-methods approach, including surveys (before and after the Mentoring Program), one to one sessions, qualitative feedback in a workshop at the end of the Program, were the strategies employed to evaluate in a holistic way the impact of the mentorship programs across the four participating countries.

One of the key questions before starting the Program was to ask participants to rate their entrepreneurial competencies, in key topics for a successful entrepreneur namely: (I) Identify opportunities for creating value, (II) Develop creative and purposeful ideas, (III) Work towards your vision of the future, (IV) Make the most of ideas and opportunities, (V) Assess the consequences and impact of ideas, opportunities and actions, (VI) Believe in yourself and keep developing, (VII) Stay focused and don't give up (see Fig. 2).

Moreover, throughout the Program, data was also collected through anonymous online questionnaires administered at the end of each activity developed within the project, ensuring confidentiality and encouraging honest responses from participants.

3.1 Benefits of the mentorship sessions

Detailed surveys were distributed to measure the perceived benefits of the mentorship sessions. The survey results revealed that:

- 87% of mentees reported a significant improvement in their entrepreneurial skills, particularly in areas such as business planning, financial literacy, and problem-solving.
- 78% of participants cited a boost in their self-confidence, stating that the mentorship had helped them overcome psychological barriers, including fear of failure and self-doubt.
- 35% of mentees successfully applied for grants or other forms of financial support for their entrepreneurial ventures during or after the program.
- 82% indicated that the guidance received during mentorship sessions improved their ability to make strategic business decisions.

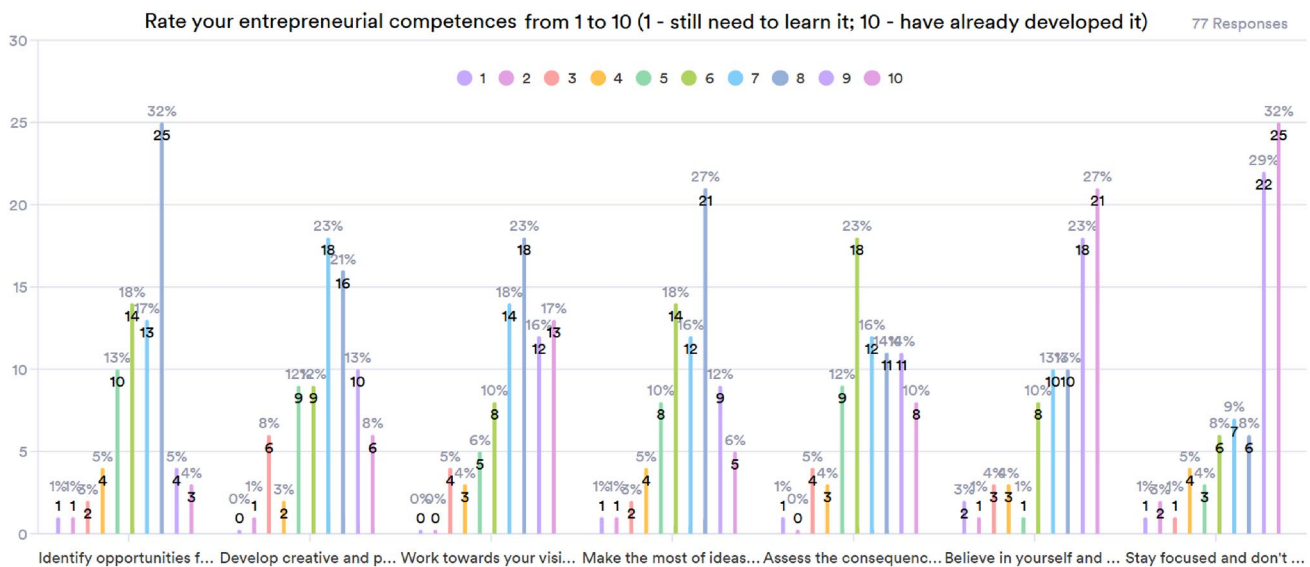


Fig. 2 Survey to assess participants' entrepreneurial competences prior to participation in the Mentorship Program

The Stanford Social Innovation Review [9] underscores the cognitive and emotional benefits of mentorship, reflected in the testimonials of AIM project participants. 90% of mentees also pointed out the importance of receiving honest feedback about their business plans, which helped them refine their ideas and prepare for real-world challenges.

3.2 Outcomes of inclusive mentorship for mentees

The inclusive entrepreneurial mentorship program in has proven to be instrumental in the development of mentees. Following the initial instructions, mentees eagerly embraced their assigned tasks, collaborating closely with their mentors to delve into various entrepreneurial topics. The subsequent webinars became a platform for the mentees to not only showcase their growing expertise but also to fine-tune their presentation and communication skills. Witnessing this evolution has been truly gratifying, as the mentees demonstrated remarkable progress in both their subject matter knowledge and their ability to convey ideas effectively. The structured approach, encouraging practical experiences and collaborative discussions, has undoubtedly fostered a dynamic learning environment that aligns seamlessly with the overarching goals of the AIM project. As we move forward, the success stories emerging from this inclusive mentorship initiative serve as a testament to the power of hands-on learning and mentorship in empowering individuals to excel in the world of entrepreneurship.

After completing the AIM program, mentees highlighted the following skills as those they had improved the most during the mentorship.

- Leadership and team management skills: 67% of mentees reported that they felt more equipped to manage teams and delegate tasks effectively.
- Risk management and decision-making: 55% of participants indicated that they were more confident in taking calculated risks and making strategic decisions for their start-ups.
- Problem-solving: 60% of mentees said they had gained practical problem-solving skills, helping them address day-to-day operational challenges in their business ventures.

These findings are consistent with the broader literature on entrepreneurial mentorship, which underscores the dual importance of skill development and psychological empowerment in the success of new entrepreneurs [3].

3.3 IEMM manuals

A significant milestone for the AIM project was the development of Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Models (IEMM) manuals in five different languages. Developed collaboratively by the four project partners during the project's first year, these manuals draw on the partners' collective expertise and provide detailed guidance on best practices in mentorship.

Both mentees and mentors provided feedback on the IEMM manuals used during the program. 85% of mentees rated the manuals as “highly useful,” particularly for their structured approach to entrepreneurial self-assessment and business planning. One mentee commented, “The manuals provided me with clear steps to follow, and the suggested tools like SWOT analysis and mind-mapping were extremely helpful”.

Characteristics of Mentors have been widely discussed in the past, and evaluated in different contexts using both quantitative and qualitative studies [10] and thus, in the IEMM there is a section on how Mentors should review and strength their qualities and characteristics when going through the Mentoring process.

Mentors, referred that they have appreciated very much the structured guidance offered by the IEMM model, with 90% expressing that it allowed for more focused and goal-oriented mentorship sessions. One mentor shared, “The IEMM framework helped me tailor my advice to each mentee’s specific needs, ensuring that I provided support where it was most needed.”

3.4 Challenges and areas for improvement

Despite its overall success, the program faced several challenges, particularly regarding participant retention. While the program started with 80 mentees, only 70% completed all phases. Several mentees cited time constraints and other professional commitments as reasons for their discontinuation. Additionally, 10% of mentees expressed that certain webinar topics were less relevant to their specific entrepreneurial interests.

To address these challenges in future iterations of the program, the AIM project team is considering offering more flexible scheduling options and diversifying webinar topics to better align with mentees’ varied entrepreneurial fields.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of inclusive mentorship in promoting entrepreneurship among underrepresented groups. By addressing both the cognitive and emotional barriers to entrepreneurship, the AIM project’s Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Model (IEMM) has demonstrated significant improvements in mentees’ entrepreneurial skills, self-efficacy, and confidence. The cross-country implementation of the mentorship programs revealed several best practices that can inform future initiatives. For instance, the inclusion of tailored guidance and practical assignments enabled mentees to develop essential entrepreneurial skills while building their self-confidence. These findings align with OECD [11] studies, which emphasizes the role of personalized mentorship in promoting entrepreneurial success [6]. The psychological benefits reported by mentees, such as overcoming fear of failure and self-doubt, highlight the importance of addressing the mental frameworks underlying entrepreneurial behavior. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive entrepreneurship by demonstrating how mentorship can serve as a tool for psychological empowerment. The significant improvement in entrepreneurial confidence among mentees supports the Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura [12], which posits that self-efficacy is enhanced through observational learning and supportive relationships. These findings suggest that mentors play a dual role: not only as providers of knowledge but also as psychological enablers.

Participant retention was a challenge, with only 70% completing all phases of the program. Crisp and Cruz [13] argue for targeted strategies to improve participant engagement, a recommendation echoed in the AIM project’s proposed future steps. Building on the successes of the AIM project, future research could explore the long-term impact of mentorship programs on entrepreneurial outcomes. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how mentorship influences the sustainability and growth of mentees’ ventures over time. Additionally, expanding the IEMM framework to other fields, such as technology and social entrepreneurship, could further validate its effectiveness and adaptability. This aligns with Tenenbaum et al. [14], who highlight the potential of mentorship frameworks to drive innovation across diverse fields.

5 Conclusions

In this comprehensive study there were 114 participants from 4 countries involved. Through different mechanisms (evaluation forms, testimonials and face to face feedback) it was possible to confirm that IEMM had a significant contribution to the mentorship program as part of a broad concept on inclusive entrepreneurship and mentorship. The highlights of the study are:

- **Cross-country comparison:** by analyzing mentorship practices across four diverse European countries, the study identifies both universal and context-specific strategies for promoting inclusive entrepreneurship;
- **Development of IEMM:** the introduction and implementation of the Inclusive Entrepreneurial Mentorship Model (IEMM) provides a structured framework that can be adapted for use in various cultural and socioeconomic contexts;
- **Practical recommendations:** the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and organizations seeking to support diverse entrepreneurs through mentorship;
- **Psychological empowerment:** by highlighting the cognitive and emotional benefits of mentorship, the study contributes to the growing body of research on the psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship.

The AIM project's activities yielded significant findings:

- **Impact on mentees:** the mentorship programs led to notable improvements in mentees' entrepreneurial skills, confidence, and access to critical resources. Mentees reported feeling more empowered to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship, with many citing mentorship as a pivotal factor in their business development. In addition to measurable improvements in entrepreneurial skills, mentees reported significant psychological benefits, including increased self-confidence and emotional resilience. Many mentees described how their mentors' guidance helped them overcome internal barriers, such as self-doubt and anxiety about starting a business. These psychological shifts are consistent with the Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura [12], which posits that self-efficacy is reinforced through supportive relationships and positive modeling behaviors.
- **Mentor–mentee relationships:** the surveys highlighted the importance of strong, trust-based relationships between mentors and mentees. The most successful mentorships were those where mentors actively engaged with mentees, offering not just business advice but also emotional support and networking opportunities.
- **Training effectiveness:** the training sessions and webinars were well-received, with participants appreciating the practical insights and strategies provided. Mentors reported a better understanding of how to support diverse entrepreneurs, while mentees felt more prepared to leverage the mentorship to advance their ventures.

AIM has successfully created a vigorous online presence to disseminate its message and engage with a broader audience. Up to 20th October 2024, the project's website has attracted more than 850 visitors, while its Facebook page has garnered 506 followers, and its LinkedIn page boasts 165 followers (target 100).

The AIM project has achieved several key deliverables, including the development of multilingual mentorship manuals, a methodology for conducting online training, and an e-tool to assess entrepreneurial readiness, available at AIM website and that can continue to be used in the future.

The project's efforts over the past years have laid a solid foundation for promoting inclusive mentorship and supporting aspiring entrepreneurs. By addressing the key barriers to entrepreneurship and providing practical, hands-on learning opportunities, AIM is making a tangible difference in the lives of future business leaders. As the project continues to evolve, the stories and successes of its participants will further highlight the importance of mentorship in advancing entrepreneurial success.

The AIM project's journey demonstrates the power of collaboration, innovation, and inclusive mentorship in shaping the future of entrepreneurship.

The AIM project has shown the significant impact that a structured and supportive mentorship model can have on aspiring entrepreneurs. By providing tailored guidance, developing essential skills, and building a network of support, both mentors and mentees have benefited immensely. The IEMM model and its implementation have set a strong foundation for future initiatives in inclusive entrepreneurship, paving the way for innovative and sustainable business ventures in other countries.

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Author contributions GV wrote the main manuscript and prepared Figs. 1 and 2, JG and LG reviewed it.

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Data availability All data generated during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from the participants to participate in the current study. The study reported in this paper was conducted in accordance with the WMA Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were adults and informed consent was obtained from them prior to partaking in the study. The study did not involve the processing of sensitive personal data, nor did it involve a physical intervention (on either living or deceased individuals). The study was not carried out using a method aimed at influencing a person physically or mentally, nor did it not pose an obvious risk of harming the research subject. Furthermore, it was not conducted on biological material from a living or deceased person. Therefore, according to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (i.e., Swedish law), no ethical review was requested for the study reported here.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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