

Transforming Literature into Popular Culture: A Kristevan Intertextual Analysis of *Bungo Stray Dogs*

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Abstract: *Bungo Stray Dogs* is a Japanese anime adaptation of Kafka Asagiri's manga that reimagines renowned Japanese authors and their literary works as fictional characters with supernatural abilities. This study examines how literary elements are transformed into popular culture through intertextual relationships between canonical literary texts and their representations in the anime. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research uses Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to analyze three major characters—Osamu Dazai, Atsushi Nakajima, and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa—and their corresponding literary works. The findings reveal that *Bungo Stray Dogs* reconstructs authors' identities, literary titles, themes, symbols, and characterizations into a new semiotic system while maintaining recognizable connections to the original texts. Literary themes such as existential alienation, identity conflict, and moral ambiguity are recontextualized into narratives of heroism, self-discovery, and supernatural power. The study concludes that the anime functions as an intertextual cultural space that revitalizes Japanese literary heritage through contemporary popular media. It also demonstrates that anime serves not only as entertainment but as an effective medium for preserving, disseminating, and reintroducing classical literature to modern and global audiences.

Keywords: *Bungo Stray Dogs*; intertextuality; literary semiotics; literary adaptation; popular culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Japanese anime has evolved beyond its role as a form of entertainment to become a significant medium for cultural transmission, literary adaptation, and historical representation. As one of the most influential forms of Japanese popular culture, anime reaches global audiences by transforming literary narratives into visually engaging stories that integrate animation, characterization, symbolism, and multimedia storytelling. Through this process, literary works are no longer confined to printed texts but are reconstructed within contemporary popular culture, allowing classical literature to be reinterpreted and appreciated by new generations of audiences (Mahdori et al., 2025; Suma et al., 2023; Junaid et al., 2025). Consequently, anime has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a site where literature, culture, and media intersect.

Among contemporary anime, *Bungo Stray Dogs* represents a distinctive example of literary adaptation. Adapted from the manga written by Kafka Asagiri and illustrated by Sango Harukawa, the series was first animated by Studio Bones in 2016 (Asagiri & Harukawa, 2012; Bones, 2016). Unlike conventional adaptations that retell literary stories directly, *Bungo Stray Dogs* reconstructs famous Japanese authors as fictional characters endowed with supernatural abilities named after their literary works. Characters such as Osamu Dazai, Atsushi Nakajima, and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa simultaneously function as fictional protagonists and cultural representations of real literary figures. This narrative strategy transforms literary texts into new semiotic systems in which authors, literary works, and historical identities are recontextualized within a modern fantasy universe.

Such transformations can be understood through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, which conceptualizes every text as a mosaic of quotations produced through the processes of

absorption and transformation of previous texts (Kristeva, 1980). From this perspective, literary adaptation is not a process of faithful reproduction but rather an act of reinterpretation that generates new meanings through relationships among multiple texts. Intertextuality therefore provides an analytical framework for examining how literary signs—including authors' identities, titles, themes, symbols, and character traits—are reconfigured when transferred into different cultural and media contexts (Fairuz et al., 2022; Jumriati et al., 2021; Andini et al., 2022). Rather than preserving original meanings intact, adaptation reconstructs these elements according to the conventions and expectations of contemporary popular culture.

Previous studies have demonstrated the relevance of intertextuality in analyzing literary adaptations within anime and other popular media. Ramadhani (2023) examined the intertextual relationship between Osamu Dazai's *Ningen Shikkaku* and the characterization of Dazai in *Bungo Stray Dogs*, concluding that the anime character represents a transformation of Ōba Yōzō while maintaining essential connections with the source novel. Similarly, Araújo (2025) investigated the representation of Japanese literary figures in *Bungo Stray Dogs* and found that the characters' identities, supernatural abilities, and personalities continue to reflect aspects of the authors' biographies and literary works. Beyond *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Hafid (2023) analyzed the adaptation of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the anime *Magi*, demonstrating that literary adaptation involves substantial shifts in meaning to accommodate the conventions of popular culture. Collectively, these studies confirm that intertextuality offers a productive framework for understanding literary transformation across media.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies have primarily focused on individual characters, specific literary works, or biographical representations of particular authors. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the broader transformation of literary elements as an integrated semiotic system, encompassing authors' names, literary titles, supernatural abilities, character construction, thematic structures, and symbolic meanings. Furthermore, previous research has rarely examined how these interconnected literary signs collectively generate new meanings within contemporary popular culture from the perspective of Kristeva's concept of textual transformation. This limitation indicates the need for a more comprehensive investigation that considers literary adaptation as an intertextual process involving multiple semiotic layers rather than isolated textual correspondences.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines the transformation of literature into popular culture in *Bungo Stray Dogs* through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality. Specifically, the study investigates how literary elements—including the names of authors, literary works, character identities, themes, and symbolic representations—are absorbed, transformed, and reconstructed into new systems of meaning within the anime. Focusing on the characters of Osamu Dazai, Atsushi Nakajima, and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, this research seeks to contribute to literary studies, anime studies, and intertextuality scholarship by demonstrating how contemporary popular media recontextualize classical literature and construct new cultural meanings through multimodal storytelling.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Intertextuality as a Framework for Literary Transformation

Intertextuality has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in contemporary literary and cultural studies because it emphasizes that no text exists independently of other texts. Julia Kristeva (1980) introduced the concept of intertextuality by arguing that every text is a mosaic of quotations produced through the processes of absorption and transformation of previous texts. Rather than functioning as isolated entities, texts continuously interact with earlier discourses, allowing meanings to evolve across historical, cultural, and social contexts.

Subsequent developments have expanded Kristeva's theory beyond literary criticism to

include film, digital media, comics, and animation. Contemporary scholars argue that intertextuality should be understood not merely as textual borrowing but as a dynamic process through which cultural meanings are reconstructed within new media environments (Allen, 2022; Gray, 2023). In visual narratives, intertextuality operates through multiple semiotic resources—including dialogue, imagery, symbolism, characterization, and visual composition—allowing audiences to recognize relationships between the original literary work and its contemporary adaptation (Bateman, 2021).

Recent studies further suggest that intertextuality plays an important role in preserving cultural memory while simultaneously generating new interpretations for contemporary audiences (Mittell, 2021; Sanders, 2024). Through this perspective, literary adaptation is understood as a productive cultural practice rather than a process of faithful reproduction. Instead of simply transferring literary content into another medium, adaptation reconstructs meanings according to the conventions, expectations, and communicative purposes of the new cultural context.

B. Literary Adaptation in Anime and Japanese Popular Culture

Japanese anime has increasingly become an important object of literary and cultural research because of its ability to reinterpret literary texts through multimodal storytelling. Unlike conventional literary adaptations, anime frequently transforms historical figures, literary characters, myths, and classical narratives into new fictional worlds that combine visual aesthetics, popular culture, and contemporary social issues (Napier, 2024; Weda et al., 2022; Rahman, 2024).

Within this context, *Bungo Stray Dogs* represents a distinctive form of literary adaptation. Rather than retelling canonical literary works directly, the anime reconstructs famous Japanese authors as fictional characters whose supernatural abilities are named after their most influential literary works. This narrative strategy creates multiple layers of intertextual references connecting literary history, biography, fiction, and fantasy into a single semiotic system.

Recent scholarship has explored several aspects of this phenomenon. Ramadhani (2023) demonstrated that the characterization of Osamu Dazai in *Bungo Stray Dogs* represents a transformation of the protagonist in *Ningen Shikkaku* rather than a direct adaptation of the novel itself. Similarly, Araújo (2025) found that the personalities, supernatural abilities, and symbolic identities of the anime characters remain closely associated with the biographies and literary works of their real-life counterparts. Beyond *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Hafid (2023) showed that the anime *Magi* reconstructs narratives from *One Thousand and One Nights* by transforming their meanings according to contemporary popular culture. Likewise, Clements (2023) argues that contemporary anime increasingly functions as a medium for preserving literary heritage while simultaneously producing new cultural meanings for global audiences.

These studies indicate that literary adaptation in anime extends beyond narrative reconstruction. Instead, adaptation involves continuous negotiation between literary traditions and contemporary media conventions, resulting in new cultural products that simultaneously preserve and reinterpret literary heritage.

C. Semiotic Transformation and the Research Gap in *Bungo Stray Dogs*

Semiotic transformation refers to the process through which signs acquire new meanings when transferred from one cultural context to another. From Kristeva's perspective, literary adaptation is fundamentally a process of sign transformation, where names, symbols, themes, narratives, and identities become interconnected within new textual systems (Kristeva, 1980). In multimodal media such as anime, these transformations occur simultaneously through verbal language, visual representation, sound, color, and character design, creating meanings that differ from those found in the original literary texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Yuniatun et al., 2025; Suheri et al., 2025).

Although previous studies have successfully identified intertextual relationships between literary works and anime characters, most have concentrated on individual literary references or character comparisons (Ramadhani, 2023; Araújo, 2025). Existing research rarely examines how

multiple literary elements—including authors' names, literary titles, supernatural abilities, characterization, thematic structures, and symbolic representations—operate collectively as an integrated semiotic system within *Bungo Stray Dogs*. Consequently, the broader process through which literary signs are reconstructed into contemporary popular culture remains insufficiently explored.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to investigate how literary elements are transformed into new systems of meaning in *Bungo Stray Dogs*. By examining the characters **Osamu Dazai**, **Atsushi Nakajima**, and **Ryūnosuke Akutagawa**, this research analyzes how literary texts are recontextualized through visual narratives and popular culture. In doing so, the study contributes to literary studies, semiotics, anime studies, and adaptation research by offering a comprehensive explanation of literary transformation as an intertextual and semiotic process rather than merely a narrative adaptation.

III. METHODS

A. Research Design

This study employed a **qualitative descriptive design** using a **literary semiotic approach** to investigate the transformation of literary elements into popular culture in the anime *Bungo Stray Dogs*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to interpret meanings embedded in verbal and visual signs rather than to quantify observable phenomena. The analysis was grounded in **Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality**, which conceptualizes every text as a product of absorption and transformation of previous texts (Kristeva, 1980). This framework enabled the researcher to examine how literary signs were reconstructed into new semiotic systems within contemporary popular culture.

B. Data Sources

The primary data consisted of the anime *Bungo Stray Dogs*, produced by Studio Bones and adapted from the manga written by Kafka Asagiri and illustrated by Sango Harukawa (Asagiri & Harukawa, 2012; Bones, 2016). The analysis focused on three major characters—**Osamu Dazai**, **Atsushi Nakajima**, and **Ryūnosuke Akutagawa**—whose identities are directly associated with prominent Japanese literary authors.

Secondary data comprised the original literary works that function as the anime's intertextual references, including **Ningen Shikkaku (No Longer Human)** by Osamu Dazai, **Sangetsuki (The Moon over the Mountain)** by Atsushi Nakajima, and **Rashōmon** by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. Additional supporting materials included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous studies on literary adaptation, semiotics, and Kristeva's theory of intertextuality.

C. Data Collection

Data were collected using **document analysis** through systematic observation and note-taking. The researcher repeatedly watched selected episodes of *Bungo Stray Dogs* to identify verbal and visual elements associated with the selected literary figures. Relevant data included character names, supernatural abilities (*abilities*), dialogue, characterization, visual symbols, narrative events, and thematic representations.

Each identified element was then documented and matched with corresponding passages from the original literary texts. The collected data were organized according to each literary figure to facilitate systematic comparison between the source texts and their representations in the anime.

D. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative procedure based on Kristeva's concept of **intertextual absorption and transformation**. The analytical process consisted of four stages. First, literary references associated with each anime character were identified by examining the relationships between the characters and their corresponding literary works. Second, verbal and visual representations in the anime were compared with the original literary texts to identify similarities and differences in characterization, themes, symbolism, and narrative functions.

Third, the identified similarities and differences were interpreted through Kristeva's theory of intertextuality by examining how literary elements were **absorbed, recontextualized, and transformed** into new semiotic meanings within the anime. Particular attention was given to the transformation of authors' names, literary titles, supernatural abilities, character identities, thematic structures, and symbolic representations.

Finally, the findings were synthesized to explain how *Bungo Stray Dogs* reconstructs Japanese literary heritage into contemporary popular culture, producing new meanings while maintaining recognizable relationships with the original literary texts.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that *Bungo Stray Dogs* reconstructs Japanese literary heritage through a systematic process of intertextual transformation. Rather than adapting literary texts directly, the anime absorbs authors' identities, literary titles, symbolic meanings, and thematic structures before recontextualizing them into a contemporary fantasy narrative. This process illustrates Kristeva's (1980) notion that every text emerges through the absorption and transformation of previous texts. The findings indicate that literary elements function not merely as references but as interconnected semiotic resources that generate new meanings within Japanese popular culture.

A. Reconstructing Osamu Dazai: From Literary Alienation to Popular Heroism

The first finding reveals that the character Osamu Dazai represents a significant transformation of both the historical author and his most influential novel, *Ningen Shikkaku* (No Longer Human). Rather than reproducing the novel's protagonist, Ōba Yōzō, the anime reconstructs Dazai as an intelligent detective whose supernatural ability, *No Longer Human*, directly references the novel's title.

From an intertextual perspective, the anime absorbs several essential literary signs associated with Osamu Dazai. These include the author's name, his fascination with suicide, psychological instability, emotional detachment, and existential pessimism. However, these elements are substantially transformed within the anime narrative. While the original novel portrays alienation as a tragic condition leading to self-destruction, *Bungo Stray Dogs* converts these psychological characteristics into strengths that define Dazai's strategic intelligence and leadership within the Armed Detective Agency.

This transformation demonstrates that literary adaptation extends beyond narrative reproduction. According to Kristeva (1980), intertextuality enables previous texts to acquire new meanings when relocated into different cultural contexts. The anime therefore reconstructs alienation not as personal despair but as symbolic wisdom, allowing the literary figure to function as a contemporary hero rather than a tragic victim.

The finding supports Ramadhani (2023), who argues that the anime preserves recognizable connections with *Ningen Shikkaku*, while simultaneously expanding the character into an entirely new fictional identity. It also aligns with Sanders (2024), who suggests that adaptation should be understood as creative reinterpretation rather than textual fidelity.

B. Transforming Atsushi Nakajima: The Tiger as a Symbol of Identity Reconstruction

The second finding concerns the transformation of Atsushi Nakajima, whose characterization is derived primarily from the short story *Sangetsuki* (The Moon Over the Mountain). In the original literary work, the tiger symbolizes personal failure, pride, isolation, and the destructive consequences of excessive ambition. In contrast, the anime reinterprets this symbol through Atsushi's supernatural ability, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*, which enables him to transform into a white tiger.

Although both texts employ identical symbolic imagery, their meanings differ substantially. The literary tiger represents irreversible psychological collapse, whereas the anime reconstructs the tiger as a metaphor for self-discovery, resilience, and personal growth. Throughout the series, Atsushi gradually learns to control his ability, symbolizing his acceptance of his own identity rather than his submission to inner conflict.

From Kristeva's perspective, this represents a clear example of textual transformation in which symbolic signs maintain recognizable relationships with their literary origins while acquiring new ideological functions. Rather than preserving the tragic symbolism of *Sangetsuki*, *Bungo Stray Dogs* reshapes it into an optimistic narrative consistent with contemporary popular storytelling.

This finding also demonstrates how anime functions as a medium of cultural reinterpretation. As argued by Araújo (2025), literary references within *Bungo Stray Dogs* are intentionally reconstructed to increase accessibility for contemporary audiences without completely abandoning their literary origins. Similarly, Napier (2024) emphasizes that modern anime frequently revitalizes classical literature by integrating traditional symbols into contemporary visual narratives.

C. Reimagining Ryūnosuke Akutagawa: Moral Conflict as Symbolic Power

The third finding reveals another distinctive pattern of intertextual transformation through the character Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. Unlike the original short story *Rashōmon*, which centers on moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas, the anime transforms these abstract philosophical concerns into visualized supernatural power.

The literary title *Rashōmon* becomes the name of Akutagawa's supernatural ability, enabling him to manipulate his black cloak into a destructive weapon. While the original narrative explores the collapse of moral certainty under social pressure, the anime reconstructs these ideas into themes of ambition, rivalry, violence, and the pursuit of recognition.

This transformation illustrates Kristeva's concept of textual productivity, whereby literary signs generate entirely new meanings without severing their relationships with the source text. The anime preserves the symbolic darkness associated with Akutagawa's literature but redirects it toward character development within an action-oriented narrative.

Moreover, the transformation reflects broader characteristics of Japanese popular culture, where literary heritage is frequently integrated into commercial media through symbolic reinterpretation rather than historical accuracy (Clements, 2023). Consequently, *Rashōmon* no longer functions exclusively as a literary text but becomes a multimodal sign operating simultaneously within literature, animation, and popular culture.

D. Intertextual Transformation as Cultural Reconstruction

Across the three characters, a consistent pattern of intertextual transformation emerges. Rather than adapting literary narratives literally, *Bungo Stray Dogs* selectively reconstructs literary signs—including authors' identities, literary titles, symbolic imagery, psychological characteristics, and thematic structures—into a new semiotic system suitable for contemporary anime.

The findings indicate four major transformation patterns.

Table 1. Patterns of Intertextual Transformation from Japanese Literary Works to *Bungo Stray Dogs*

Literary Element	Original Literary Function	Function in <i>Bungo Stray Dogs</i>
Authors' names	Historical literary identity	Fictional character identity
Literary titles	Titles of literary works	Names of supernatural abilities
Literary themes	Alienation, morality, identity crisis	Heroism, self-discovery, rivalry
Literary symbols	Psychological and philosophical metaphors	Visual symbols of supernatural power

These findings extend previous studies by demonstrating that *Bungo Stray Dogs* does not merely adapt individual literary works but constructs an integrated **intertextual semiotic system**. While earlier research primarily examined character similarities (Ramadhani, 2023; Araújo, 2025), this study reveals how multiple literary signs collectively generate new meanings through processes of absorption and transformation.

From a broader perspective, the anime illustrates that literary adaptation is simultaneously an act of cultural preservation and cultural innovation. Classical Japanese literature remains recognizable through names, titles, and symbolic references, yet these elements are reinterpreted according to the narrative conventions of contemporary popular culture. Consequently, *Bungo Stray Dogs* demonstrates how anime functions as an effective medium for revitalizing literary heritage while introducing it to global audiences through new multimodal forms of storytelling.

E. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *Bungo Stray Dogs* does not merely adapt Japanese literary works into an animated format but reconstructs them through a complex process of intertextual transformation. In accordance with Kristeva's (1980) concept of intertextuality, the anime functions as a new text that absorbs literary elements from earlier texts and reorganizes them into a different semiotic system. Rather than preserving the original narratives, the anime selectively transforms authors' identities, literary titles, symbolic meanings, and thematic structures into visual and narrative components that correspond to the conventions of contemporary popular culture. This finding reinforces the argument that literary adaptation is fundamentally a process of meaning production rather than textual reproduction (Allen, 2022).

The transformation of Osamu Dazai, Atsushi Nakajima, and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa illustrates how literary signs retain their cultural identity while simultaneously acquiring new communicative functions. For instance, *No Longer Human*, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*, and *Rashōmon* no longer operate solely as literary titles but become supernatural abilities that define each character's identity and role within the anime narrative. This semiotic shift indicates that literary references in *Bungo Stray Dogs* function as multimodal signs integrating language, visual imagery, characterization, and action into a coherent narrative system. Such findings support Bateman's (2021) proposition that multimodal narratives generate meaning through the interaction of verbal and visual semiotic resources rather than through language alone.

Another important finding concerns the reinterpretation of literary themes. The existential alienation portrayed in *Ningen Shikkaku*, the identity conflict represented by the tiger in *Sangetsuki*, and the moral ambiguity embedded in *Rashōmon* are transformed into themes of heroism, self-discovery, rivalry, and personal empowerment. Although the original philosophical meanings are modified, the anime preserves sufficient literary traces to allow audiences familiar with Japanese literature to recognize the intertextual connections. This process illustrates what Sanders (2024) describes as **creative adaptation**, in which fidelity to the source text is less important than the generation of new cultural meanings that remain dialogically connected to earlier texts.

The findings also extend previous studies on *Bungo Stray Dogs*. Ramadhani (2023) primarily examined the relationship between *Ningen Shikkaku* and the characterization of Osamu Dazai, while Araújo (2025) focused on how Japanese literary figures are represented within the anime. The present study expands these perspectives by demonstrating that intertextuality in *Bungo Stray Dogs* operates not only at the level of individual characters but also through an integrated semiotic network consisting of authors' names, literary titles, symbolic representations, thematic structures, and supernatural abilities. These interconnected literary signs collectively construct a new cultural narrative that bridges classical Japanese literature and contemporary global popular culture.

From a broader cultural perspective, the findings indicate that anime serves as an effective medium for revitalizing literary heritage. Instead of replacing classical literature, *Bungo Stray Dogs* introduces canonical Japanese authors and their works to contemporary audiences through engaging multimodal storytelling. As argued by Napier (2024), anime increasingly functions as a cultural platform that reinterprets traditional literary narratives for global audiences while preserving their symbolic significance. Therefore, literary adaptation in anime should be understood not merely as entertainment but also as a form of cultural mediation that promotes literary awareness and intercultural communication. Theoretically, this study contributes to intertextuality research by demonstrating that literary transformation in contemporary anime is best understood as the reconstruction of interconnected semiotic systems rather than as the adaptation of isolated literary texts.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the transformation of Japanese literary works into popular culture through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality by analyzing the anime *Bungo Stray Dogs*. The findings demonstrate that the anime reconstructs literary heritage through a systematic process of absorption and transformation, rather than through direct adaptation. Literary elements—including authors' names, literary titles, character identities, thematic structures, and symbolic representations—are recontextualized into a new semiotic system that aligns with the conventions of contemporary anime while maintaining recognizable connections with their original literary sources.

The analyses of Osamu Dazai, Atsushi Nakajima, and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa reveal that literary references in *Bungo Stray Dogs* function as interconnected semiotic resources rather than isolated textual borrowings. Classical themes such as existential alienation, identity conflict, and moral ambiguity are transformed into narratives emphasizing heroism, self-discovery, rivalry, and personal empowerment. These transformations illustrate that intertextuality is not simply a mechanism for preserving literary traditions but also a productive process that generates new cultural meanings for contemporary audiences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to intertextuality and literary adaptation scholarship by demonstrating that literary transformation in anime operates through an integrated network of verbal and visual signs. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on individual characters or specific literary references, this research highlights how multiple literary elements collectively construct a coherent intertextual semiotic system. This perspective broadens the application of Kristeva's intertextuality beyond textual comparison and underscores the importance of multimodal analysis in understanding the relationship between literature and popular culture.

Practically, the findings suggest that anime can serve as an effective medium for introducing classical literature to younger and international audiences. By reinterpreting literary texts within engaging visual narratives, anime contributes to the preservation and global dissemination of Japanese literary heritage while simultaneously fostering intercultural understanding. The study therefore reinforces the role of popular culture as a bridge between canonical literature and contemporary media consumption.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to three characters and their corresponding literary works

within a single anime series. Future research may expand the scope by examining additional characters, comparing multiple anime adaptations based on literary texts, or integrating other theoretical perspectives such as multimodal discourse analysis, cultural semiotics, or adaptation theory. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how literature continues to evolve across diverse media and cultural contexts in the digital era.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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