

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Enhancing Persona Creation Through the Hermeneutic Fusion of Horizons: Business Applications in AI Natural Language Generation

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Abstract: This paper details the creation of a persona often used in business research, product development, and marketing through the hermeneutic fusion of horizons and finally applying it to artificial intelligence (AI) natural language generation platforms. The intent is to discern if hermeneutics has the utility of creating a higher-resolution persona and rendering more accurate data for better integration and insight. The paper first reviews the utility of the persona and the impetus for use in business applications as well as the potential benefits and concerns. The hermeneutic background of horizons and circles is presented, leading to a review of the process of creating the first two horizons and the final fusion. The first horizon is the background of the domain, and the creation of the interview questions is needed to create the second horizon, where the domain members present current sentiment. Fusing the first two horizons summarizes the two data sets by rendering them into a singular narrative akin to a persona. The paper applies an example fusion of horizons crafted over a 14-month research project previously published in 2022 in two specific tests. The first application is where the example fusion is used to create AI versions of domain personas to verify richness and accuracy, and the second application used the example fusion as a means to create a sales strategy for a software company targeting the domain. Four AI platforms were tested, and the results were compared and contrasted. As the research is conceptual, there is no clear conclusion, but it offers a glimpse into possibilities and future research.

Keywords: persona, hermeneutics, marketing, sales, industrial distribution, AI, ChatGPT

1. Introduction

The concept of a persona being a fictionalized representation of a group as an individual is not new; it has been used in research, product development, and marketing circles since the early 1990s [1]. The creation is natural as the projection of someone's character being assumed, as Cooper [1] noted, who also popularized its use for product development to understand the desires and needs of targeted users. In social media research, the natural process of imitation to create a persona is deeply rooted in anonymity, acting as a mask that forms familiarity with group membership [2]. The persistence of the persona is the empathetic connection psychologically with the targeted individuals, offering significant insight as well as being noted as the best strategy for development needed for a singular focus and not a broad audience [1, 3]. The intention of the persona remains the distillation of a targeted group focusing on pain, needs, and goals that yield a positive return on investment to organizations that deploy them [4]. Developers such as Cooper explain that the most reliable personas need to be specifically precise and not the average, as average ruins development simply by low resolution to intention. However, a debate over utility and alternatives not unlike data-driven persona models are also compelling, driving novel research [3, 5].

Reading the original words written by Cooper [1] discussing the iterated process of refinement and care crafting personas with the greatest utility parallels the hermeneutic process of interpreting human experiences by creating a fusion detailed by many qualitative researchers reaching similar machinations [6, 7]. Again, noting the caution of Cooper with average and broad personas, the potential misapplication of personas can be seen in many of the criticisms mentioned by Salminen et al. [5], where the questions of bias, time, replication, and validity can be addressed as part of hermeneutic design in many paradoxical, yet advantageous ways noted later.

Understanding the hermeneutic process of constellated experiences is essential, and it is called a fusion of horizons. The fusion is a persona derived from a collection of horizons akin to interpreted experiences where Gadamer [8] believed there was a connection between language, understanding, and the emergence of prejudice (bias). In hermeneutic terms, a horizon is a vehicle of knowledge produced by prejudice akin to a vantage point through dialogue [9]. Gadamer noted early on that prejudice was neutral in nature and became a prequalifier for the observation and lived experience of the world surrounding the receiving individual. As part of the lived experience, prejudice is essential as a means to act critically to understand internal motivations and the world in which humans are embedded [10]. Gadamer lived until 2002 and may have seen some of the development of novel technology and even witnessed the nascence of artificial intelligence (AI), speculatively [11]. Still, Gadamer, the originator of hermeneutics, could not have predicted the meteoric rise of AI or its potential effects on venerated theories and methodologies.

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1.1. Conceptual purpose

Artificial intelligence and natural language processing (NLP) advances have led to publicly available natural language generation (NLG) platforms focused on marketing and written content, such as Anyword, Copy.ai, Jasper, and Writesonic, also purposively chosen for this paper to examine. One of the applications touted by these NLG platforms is their ability to automate sales and marketing tasks, where one key element is developing the brand voice, target market, and specialized content (marketing copy) that require a persona to create effectively. However, a significant question arises: as domains requiring sales, marketing, and product development embrace AI, can the needed AI personas benefit from a hermeneutic approach to creation?

1.2. Domain justification

The intended outcome is not definitive or terminal. However, it benefits two domains from an integrated perspective, the first being business-specific to marketing and content creation. According to Salminen et al. [12], applying advanced and innovative approaches to marketing research and practical applications crosses boundaries into many additional domains. Furthermore, the traditional marketing and business approaches cannot automatically adapt to the changing technology specific to AI, creating the gap that researchers seek to close. Salminen et al. [12] also opine that the speed at which academics respond is lagging, indirectly validated by the increased amount of AI tools built on the same OpenAI technology.

Forward-looking, as AI becomes a saturated offering and the novelty starts to wane, developing better support processes and best practices becomes a priority where the inherent arms race of AI content platforms suffers casualties and assimilations similarly to other imitative markets. It is understood that persona creation is of paramount importance in many essential processes [1, 3]. The benefits of hermeneutic focus are in establishing more resolute AI training data, not in quantity but in quality, and understanding the shortcomings of AI to find more consistent business application utility. In a support role, AI must integrate into greater established methodologies at various levels.

The ability to seek Ricoeur's [13] balance (hermeneutic cocreation) between AI and inherent human bias and the natural tendency to imitate presume the missing elements that AI struggles to accommodate. From the Luddite perspective, the more significant challenge to the hermeneutic phenomenological domain is that the interpretation of the data can be made by AI over the more superficial descriptive elements that distinguish hermeneutics from transcendental design. Emphasizing interpretive over descriptive, AI interpretation impresses better descriptions, becoming more challenging to differentiate from the hermeneutic process akin to an asymptote where the end will never become apparent. Still, the comparator loses the ability to nuance the difference between either human or AI, and where does the care subside?

1.3. Conceptual design and limitations

Jaakkola [14] reveals that conceptual paper designs foster a singular ambition to create knowledge from critically chosen diverse sources, in the simplest terms, a novel synthesis from penetration and integration of existing modalities. This paper explains the process of creating the hermeneutic fusion of horizons from the literature perspective and the 14-month process behind a published work regarding industrial distribution leadership by Tolbert [15]. The sample fusion of the industrial

distribution leader is used to create an AI persona through the four purposively selected NLG platforms, where the results are compared and contrasted, focusing on nuanced creation that was not readily apparent in the original manually crafted fusion. The sample fusion is also used as the persona to create sales strategies for a customer resource management (CRM) software company through the same four platforms to examine a practical application.

In the original Tolbert [15] work crafting the sample persona of the industrial distribution leader, the process was hermeneutic, involving a three-step thematic coding process and triangulation of transparency via an audit trail, member checking, and negative case analysis. However, conceptual papers such as this one seek to unpack a clear and compelling advocacy of a revised traditional approach. Even the conventional generalization notions and replication become enigmatic. The AI-generated output analyzed by AI testing software such as GPTZero, for instance, determines that the work has a high probability of being generated by AI derived from the original persona, including the original themes and impressions, but differs in wording manifestations. Generalization and repeatability have, therefore, become the creation of detectable AI, not the acceptance or rejection of a null hypothesis via testable result akin to a positivist ideal. Furthermore, attempting to code similarly to the original process becomes redundant as the key themes are the same across all four AI platforms, where the comparison strictly looks for tonal threads of variation. The validation remainder is the transparency of the AI-generated outputs, which are available for readers to assess if desired.

Analogous to any qualitative inquiry, the conceptual treatment starts with a brief review of the highlighted literature; in this case, hermeneutic features specific to the persona creative motivations such as the hermeneutic circle and horizons. Limitations of hermeneutics are emphasized and addressed. As AI, NLP, and NLG in this paper are applicationist tools, they are not profoundly reviewed; however, the group of scarce works relevant to the hermeneutic integration of AI are examined. The paper continues building the hermeneutic fusion as a persona and is completed with the example of the industrial distribution leader. The selection of the AI platforms, the criteria for comparison, and additional digital persona literature are discussed as a primer to testing. The comparison of the AI-generated personas of the industrial distribution leaders was completed, and then, the strategy of marketing CRM to industrial distributors was followed. The concluding part of the conceptual paper summarizes the main findings and expresses the desire for additional research on the novelty of hermeneutic integration with AI and business applications.

2. Hermeneutic Horizons

As with qualitative phenomenological research, there are two schools of thought regarding design seeking the horizons as a function of the lived experience [10]. The first is the popular transcendental variant, which requires a descriptive approach to reducing bias through bracketing and other means to separate the researcher from the research focusing on observed events [10]. Husserl [16] desired a moment to observe daily experiences, exposing the apparent truth to hidden and unique meanings. Adding to Husserl, but from the perspective of embracing bias, the hermeneutic design is interpretive where, as noted by Heidegger [17] and then by Gadamer [8], the researcher becomes part of the research, cocreating the means of the interpreted experienced reality.

Ricoeur [13] adds to the duality of the cocreation of the horizon by noting that it is the intersection between the narrative and the reader's world. From Ricoeur's view, the aim of interpretation is not to impose or uncover the researcher's or the reader's

intentions or meanings but to understand that the narrative is the objectivation of the participant's cocreation of subjectivity. The definition emerges from its own inherent meaning [10, 13]. As Ricoeur [13] says insightfully, "Hermeneutics can be defined no longer as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being in the world displayed by the text".

2.1. The paradoxical limitations of hermeneutics

All processes used in research have inherent weaknesses and challenges, and hermeneutic inquiry is no different. The paramount weakness is also part of the hermeneutic appeal, which is bias, as the researcher is part of the research domain, as noted earlier [9, 10]. The bias leads to concern over subjectivity—more so than typical qualitative designs—and is a major concern in the utility of personas [5]. The chosen validation process can be a remedy; however, in crafting horizons, the validation becomes iterations of refinement and questioning assumptions associated with the negative case or missing component [10, 18].

Another concern is the lack of generalizability and replication of the research [9]. As the iterations increase through the refinement process, the resulting horizons become narrow, no longer being a broad context of the description of the individual or domain [18]. The narrowness limits relevance to wider contexts and replication based on the researcher's and subjects' temporality and subjectivity [18]. Additionally, replication is hindered by the inherent time-consuming process required by hermeneutics as well as the commitment [9].

Purely academic constraints such as institutional review board (IRB) approval, validation processes, and sample selection are briefly mentioned within sections of the paper. Still, it is essential to note that the hermeneutic approach to persona creation does not have to follow any prescribed academic constraint or policy based on application, considering much of the use of AI and personas is focused on sales, marketing, or product development [1, 19].

2.2. Hermeneutics and AI research

Hermeneutics research involved with AI has several layers of focused insight, which are part of assessments, literature reviews, and variations on types of discourse addressing the interactions of humans and AI, including social risks. To start, Coeckelbergh [20] discusses human and robotics integration in social robotics research, noting that hermeneutics has a pivotal role in clear understanding through interpretation. The key hermeneutic concept is that the social robot is a cocreated unique artifact that surfaces between the soulless tool and the fetishized intelligent golem [20]. Wellner [21] adds that postphenomenology (investigation of relations between humans and technology) establishes the hermeneutic cocreation of the voice that technology imparts to artificiality silent in the past. The mediation of technology, as noted by Verbeek [22, 23] and later by Wellner, becomes a benefit of the utility of AI despite the inherent risks. As a specific complement, Carter et al. [24] use hermeneutics to analyze the divide between the benefits of AI and the social dangers regarding accountability and ethics surrounding access to the mediation.

Hermeneutics is also used to understand further the consequentialism of new technology, where the process attempts to temper and make the noted assessments more realistic [21, 25]. Grunwald [25] discusses the hermeneutic circle being used in a Bayesian fashion, where societal understanding of the potential impacts of poorly understood and highly volatile AI technology can be made more transparent quickly and effectively. Grunwald

adds that hermeneutics could potentially assist with the classic control dilemma where unknowns affect the optimality of the early and late stages of development. The dilemma is also alluded to by Cooper [1] and was one of the benefits of creating high-fidelity personas assisting developers early in the development process to be more accurate and reduce rework.

Hermeneutics offers researchers a valuable lens through which to see the paradox of AI, as noted by the software assessment crafted by Possati [26]. Possati aggregates Verbeek [22, 23], who indicated that the composite intentionality of technology is not intended to be truthful but an emergence of innovation or newness. Possati combines rational causality with profound ignorance, where hermeneutics mediates between reality and the created symbolic representation. Ricoeur [13] addresses the paradox as distance, the novelty of meaning via growth beyond the intentions of the creator, the environmental origin, and the original intended audience where both origin and destination exist simultaneously.

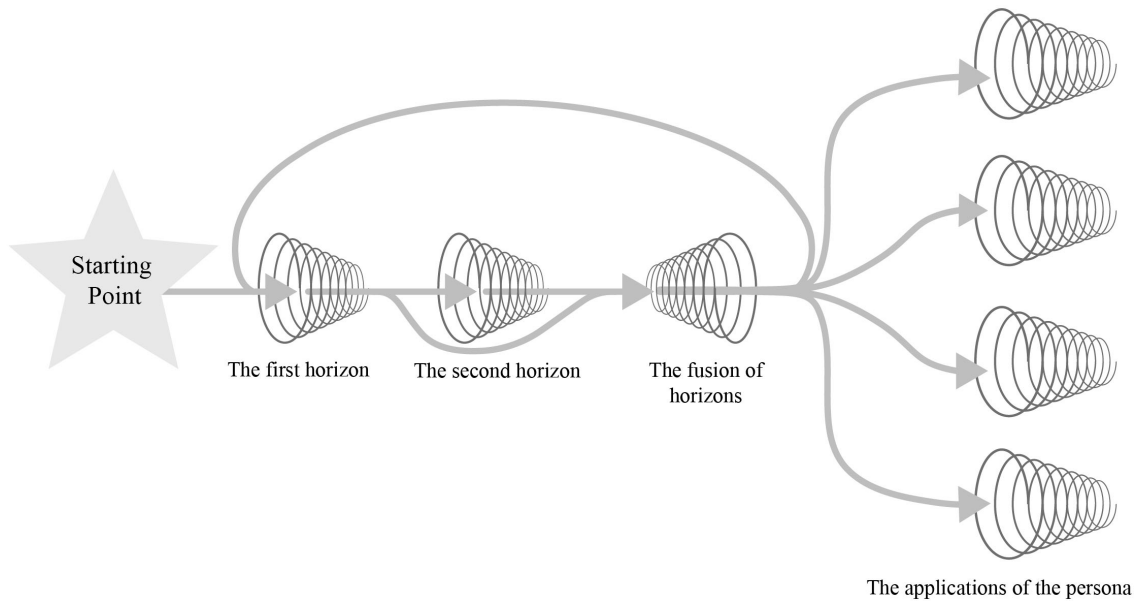
Regarding resolution or fidelity, Henrickson [27] discussed the creation of thanabots that are AI replications of deceased individuals. Henrickson used hermeneutics as the vehicle of meaning-making through three aspects of rhetoric, everyday experiences, and emotions borrowed from Menke and Schwarzenegger [28]. Thanabots, similarly to all AI (also NPG and NLG), are trained, here ideally through elements of the actual departed individual versus an anonymous persona crafted as a fusion [27]. Henrickson noted that emotional connections, the grieving process, and the illusion of presence were critical outcomes of the personalization of AI. Gauging accuracy has been challenging as AI, despite the best efforts of many researchers, has been approximative or even factually incorrect in some cases for various reasons akin to a blind spot [3, 27, 29].

Research on hermeneutics conceptualized or theorized through NLG prompts (or AI tools in general) was scant via several databases and repositories. However, one piece stood out by Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela [30], who conducted experiments using different prompts to review the output created by ChatGPT. Interestingly, their motivations mirrored the intentions of this paper: "We believe that given the increasingly widespread use of these systems there is value in applying a hermeneutical lens (and hermeneutics-informed prompts) to these systems to identify their impacts on human understandings of self". Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela endeavored to teach ChatGPT to process hermeneutic meaning through four cases: (1) written by a human, (2) written by AI, (3) human text analyzed by AI, and (4) AI text analyzed by AI. Their finding was that the outputs were indeed readable, yet the resolution or hermeneuticity varied considerably. The increased specificity through the prompts had an apparent reduction viewed as enhanced neutrality, opposite of what one would expect [30].

3. The Hermeneutic Process of Building the Fusion

The fusion of horizons focuses on interpretation through dialogue and recognition of the subjective nature of understanding, initial state, inquiry, thematic concentration, separation, and reexamination [8, 17]. The starting position for creating the horizons is the researcher's attitude akin to positionality [6]. Finlay [6] advocates the Merleau-Ponty [31] approach to attitude regarding suspending familiarity when observing a phenomenon and embracing an extreme state of openness. Other researchers [9, 10, 18] agree but offer more of a balance between the familiar as a means to offer purposive inquiry yet have the openness to not disregard discourse and

Figure 1
The process of building horizons seen as hermeneutic spirals



Note: This is an original figure depicting the concentration and dispersion between hermeneutic spirals as they travel ultimately to applications in a Bayesian fashion.

novelty. Vandermause and Fleming [7] provide that the researcher’s goal in the hermeneutic interpretive process is to assume the cocreator’s attitude toward the subject being interviewed. The researcher practices openness in listening, asking open-ended questions, and assisting in articulating the subjects’ experiences akin to facilitation [7, 32].

The actual process of creating a hermeneutic fusion has three broad strokes. It parallels Holzinger et al.’s [33] approach to persona creation yet differs at the start and the completion of the process. The novel approach can be seen in Figure 1: (1) the creation of a pre-understanding as the first horizon, importantly allowing for the interview questions to be crafted and precoded; (2) the creation of the current state of the domain through interviews as the second horizon; and lastly, (3) the creation of the fusion being the synthesis of both horizons presented as a single narrative distilling the pains, gains, and aspirations of an explicative domain member as a group or as an individual. The hermeneutic process deviates from Holzinger et al. [33], where the validation of the persona can be repeated at any stage, not just as a quasi-member checking function by domain experts post-creation. The deviation is also in the hermeneutic spirals where the broader context narrows in the first two horizons and then reverses as the fusion becomes more encompassing as the impetus to various applications such as AI where the process starts to narrow again.

The actual capture of codes or themes (used interchangeably as a word or short phrase) is emergent as the researcher must work to create an individual best practice; moreover, the research literature is incomplete in guidance outside of the basic structure [34]. As a note, Saldaña [34] advises that using a hierarchy is akin to a code begetting a category and spawning a theme and concedes that the researcher needs to follow a systematic reduction method with the proper attitude.

As a metaphorical example of attitude for coding, there is a notion of the meditative butcher who systematically separates

parts as all butchers conduct their profession but has a careful intent and, paradoxically, even love for the animal being butchered [35]. This care is an excellent attribute of hermeneutics, where intention supersedes strict adherence to any approach based on prejudice (inherent bias of cocreation), not shared by other qualitative designs [9]. Regarding care, tool selection follows the same focus of intent and researcher utility, as the researcher can use a manual process, spreadsheets, or numerous qualitative software packages for coding and analysis [34].

Additional rounds of coding, as numerous as needed, begin the comparison and development efforts of narrowing the information and developing what is similar and what is missing from each round [36]. Unique to the first horizon, focused more clearly later, is a comparison between research works from direct and indirect domains, establishing an initial set of themes defining the target. Notably, the narrowed themes become the basis of the interview questions needed to create the second horizon through individuals, for example, going from the assumed persona to verifying the real persona that becomes the inevitable fusion [7, 37].

3.1. Horizon 1: Pre-understanding the domain

After understanding the researcher’s primary intent, limitations, and positionality, the next step in the process is to craft the first horizon, which is the pre-understanding of the domain in question [8]. This approach differs from the typical qualitative design, being significantly more robust upfront as a priori. It borders quantitative design in relevance, and a thorough understanding must exist before expansion through the discovery activity akin to the purpose of quantitative design in advance to prepare for hypothesis testing [15]. The process is iterative and is purposively a hermeneutic literature review [38]. Still, in the case of persona creation, the constraints are accessible to all sources and domains outside of traditional academics [1, 5].

The historical context of a domain provides the scaffolding upon which its current state rests [39]. It is imperative to unravel the tapestry of past events, ideologies, and seminal figures that have contributed to the evolution of the domain [40]. This historical grounding enables an understanding of how the past influences present and potential future trajectories, creating the conditions for a detailed domain analysis [38]. A thorough understanding of the motivations of the individuals is crucial because it involves exploring how and why individuals gravitate toward or away from the domain, including influential figures and societal trends that drive integration [41].

After understanding the historical context, key events that shaped the development, and the current state of innovation, no analysis would be complete without assessing fitness regarding threats and challenges that domain subjects could be concerned with [40]. Many internal and external vulnerabilities and pressures must be examined, including technological disruption, shifting market demands, and potential regulatory landscape shifts [1, 40].

In summation, Cooper [1] stated that a persona is "... precise description of our user and what he wishes to accomplish". The missing component in Cooper's description is the means to capture the precision needed to craft the persona. The hermeneutic process of creating the fusion of the past themes depicting the perceived persona is contrasted with the current lived experience of members, establishing a single narrative [18, 41].

3.2. Horizon 2: Domain interviews

The primary focus of the second fusion is to choose a purposive population sample of subjects willing to be interviewed from the domain and to ask the questions created from the analysis of the first fusion [15]. Aside from the academic constraints of protecting the subjects via an IRB and the inherent weaknesses of nonrandomness, the purposive sample is required by hermeneutics because of the domain membership [7]. The researcher must select participants with specific knowledge directly within or through an adjacent domain [7]. Often, in the academic sphere, as part of the triangulation of validity, a focus group or alternative sample is used for comparison as well as member checking post-extraction [42, 43]. The number of participants is also subjective again, as this is a Bayesian process focused on being practical yet thorough. Still, there is a commonly accepted practice of homogeneity or saturation where no new participants offer novel information [42].

Unlike conventional interviews, hermeneutic interviews are more nuanced and profound, looking at personal experiences and perceptions [7]. The interview question construction, to glean the phenomenological essence of the experience through those experiencing it, is yet again not evident in the literature, nor are there numerous example sets. Tolbert [15] published the original set of questions created from the first horizon with the precoding and the transition to the final set through the interview process, noting a complement to the example fusion provided later. An axiom is that the questions will change through the process [7].

Considering hermeneutics concerns interpretation, language is valuable because every word, metaphor, or symbol offers insight into the individual [8]. The underlying meaning is often not apparent at the moment of capture, again expressing the need to focus on the complete interview as a subset of the more significant data set of all the interviews [42]. As noted, the focus of the interview is not conventional because the researcher and the subject are together trying to cocreate or make sense of the question [7].

The focus is also letting the subject speak, but sometimes offering a narrative to set the stage or reasoning behind a topic

becomes equally important as the emergence of unique content [44]. Genuine curiosity through open-ended and reflexive questions creates an inviting opportunity through anonymity to capture the honesty and real experiences unique to the subject that are not available through other means [7]. Offering a personal narrative from the researcher's perspective, aside from lowering the discomfiture and resistance of the subject, requires an interchange of subject stories and narratives [7, 44].

Data extraction is the final step of creating the second horizon, where the interviews, field notes, and memos need to be transcribed and coded into narrow themes from the first horizon, matching the precodes of the crafted interview questions or through new themes created in vivo during the interview process [37]. The transcription process, similar to the initial tools used for coding, can be done manually via service or software tools [15]. Based on volume, the transcription process conducted manually is time-consuming, offering the researcher a unique opportunity to capture a second impression from each interview in preparation for the first coding round [37].

3.3. Horizon 3: The fusion

The fusion can be seen as the interpretation of the first and second horizons via concentrated themes. The researcher has to transmute to the meditative butcher, carefully narrowing the codes and combining and strengthening them to become the vital few. For example, the Tolbert [15] study involved reviewing 5,000 codes to 15 significant themes, which were then distilled into 6 implications in creating the example fusion presented later.

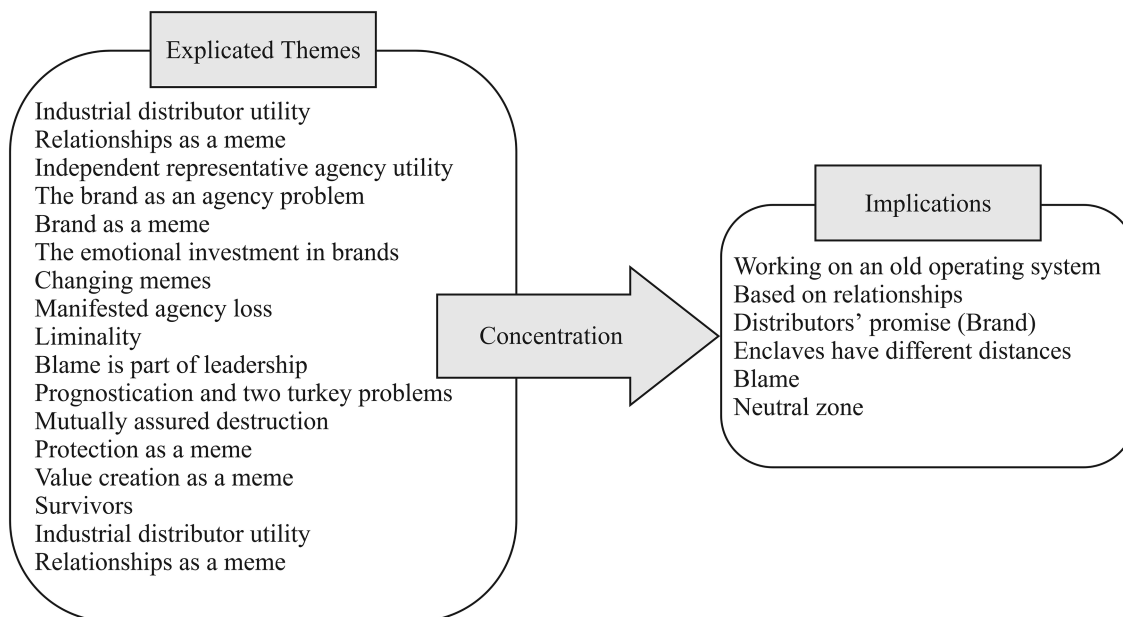
The distillation of the major themes clearly defines what they are and then adds the narrative context in direct quotes or impressions of shared sentiment [34]. Writing a narrative of each theme facilitates the interpretation of the origin of the themes and how they impact the individual positively and negatively in the form of pains and gains akin to the classic value proposition [41]. Additionally, the negative case narrative, noting the incongruity between the first and second horizons, can be used for validation [37]. Still, it becomes vital to find it by adjusting the first horizon or returning to the subjects for additional questions [38]. Through the narratives, it often becomes apparent that some themes start having a complementary nature, where one theme only manifests with others, creating a secondary group [42]. For example, the researcher seeks the answer to how the interaction of the major themes affects the individual within the domain, which does not occur independently of the combination. An example shift can be seen in Figure 2.

The creation of the fusion becomes very straightforward as the significant elements of an outline are now created, with the central themes acting as elemental building blocks [9]. However, the conjecture is the writing format, in the original form presented by Gadamer [8], which was to emulatively assume the identity of the industrial domain member and craft a first-person narrative. In academics, the use of the first person is frowned upon, and any references to the actual fusion of horizon creation are crafted in an academic variant matching the normality of the research article [15]. The example fusion of the industrial distribution leader can be seen in Appendix D (<https://figshare.com/s/56306c9ce5aa2bba26ca>).

4. Creating the Fusion Persona

The fusion is, in essence, the persona and what will be used in the AI testing; however, depending on the application, personas can be presented in several forms [4]. One may ask why the narrative should be made if the summaries from the first and second

Figure 2
An example shift in sensemaking for industrial distribution leaders



Note: This is an original figure based on the data provided by Tolbert [15] on explicated themes and implications depicting the concentration of themes becoming implications.

horizons are created from the literature, interviews, and reflective extraction of themes. This question is not unfounded; the summarized data are essential and used to create the pain points in Figure 3. Still, without the narrative powering the fusion, the process is incomplete. The embodiment of an image offers the ability to synthesize nuanced information into needs that are not entirely evident and derivatives, such as motivations and priority of future aspirations for the individual and the organization [41]. To reemphasize a point from Braun and Clarke [42], the tension created by waiting to code until the data set is effectuated, as well as the need for multiple rounds of coding, forces the researcher to move from descriptive observations to interpretation as the desired objective of hermeneutics. Creating the fusion of horizons is the next progression from the tension [8].

4.1. Creating the AI-generated alternative persona

As a housekeeping note, henceforth, the words NLG and AI will be used interchangeably for convenience. The persona creation used four AI platforms: Copy.ai, Anyword, Writesonic, and Jasper, from 15 possible researched options. The selection of AI platforms was purposive based on two criteria: marketing content focus and the ability to conduct trials through custom tools and generic prompts as needed. Many of the organizations selling digital persona creation tools, as promoted commercially on the web, offered less flexibility from an AI training perspective where the entirety of the original industrial distribution leader fusion could not be used or was missing a general prompt lacking the ability to test the CRM. The importance of flexibility was the need to steer the persona creation as a means to adapt the tool for testing consistently across the four selected platforms [45].

Interestingly, the only guidance in the literature for the number of platforms for testing was that of case study selection. The selection of one case study was problematic as it leads to confirmation of the

researcher’s bias but offered no ideal number other than the advice that case selection is based on bearing and criteria [46]. As mentioned in the limitations, the output of the AI platforms can be replicated as being identifiable, but now that the four platforms use a common backbone NLG, discussed later, other platforms could also be potentially tested, even with rigid platforms if divided into multiple tests. The executed outcome showcased a persona created directly from the example fusion of industrial distribution leaders with the expectations of crafting an alternative persona through an NLG prompt. In the spirit of machine learning, the idea of generative AI with sophisticated processes makes connections across vast amounts of data unknown to the researcher, and the interest is the creation and connections not evident, enhancing the resolution of the persona akin to answers searching for a hypothesis [47].

All four AI platforms were contacted and asked about using GPT-4 from Open.ai as the main engine behind their process based on being the optimal persona tool [48]. Jasper (personal communication, May 05, 2024) noted as follows:

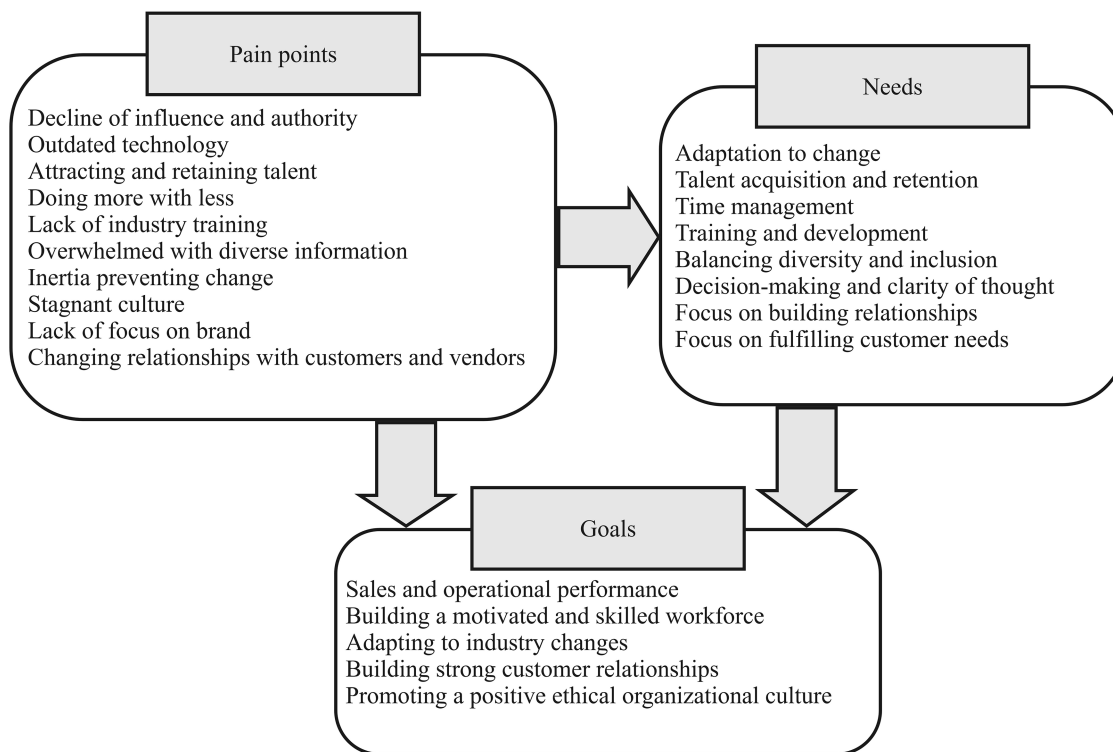
GPT-4 is actually one of Jasper’s core models! We are actively using this in areas where there is increased performance. That’s one of the amazing benefits of using Jasper. Our AI Engine gives you instant access to the world’s best models, including GPT-4 and an array of others, as soon as they launch. Our engine automatically selects the right model for the job, then layers in Google facts, SEO tools, and more. (para. 4–5)

Writesonic (personal communication, May 05, 2024) confirmed that GPT-4 was also a core model:

At present, we employ a model-agnostic approach, utilizing GPT-4 and Claude LLM models by default. This approach allows us to leverage the advanced capabilities of GPT-4 and Claude LLM models, ensuring a dynamic and versatile environment for various research and academic applications. (para. 3)

Copy.ai (personal communication, May 07, 2024) noted similarly to Writesonic but from a tiered subscriber level, “We are happy to

Figure 3
Relationships between pain points, needs, and goals



Note: This is an original figure created to display the relationships between pain points, needs, and goals initiated by creating the hermeneutic fusion of horizons.

inform you that we do have a GPT-4 Chat upgrade available for our paying customers” (para. 2). Anyword’s (personal communication, May 05, 2024) response was similar to Copy.ai’s: “Anyword uses GPT-3.5 along with other Large Language Models and homegrown models” (para. 3).

4.2. Comparison criteria

Initially, the process was to use the nine questions presented to evaluate personas by Goel et al. [49] that were designed for student evaluators of manual personas that were later compared to GPT-3 creations. The questions primarily looked at consistency and whether the persona felt human, akin to a Turing test in some ways. However, the GPT-3 evaluations offered more insight into the creation of three emergent questions: (1) Did the AI-generated persona help the understanding of the subject? (2) Could the AI-generated persona assist with decision-making? And (3) What assumed elements of the subject were absent?

The process of testing needed some structure in addition to the emergent queries. A critical assumption was that the AI platforms understood without training what a persona represented as a construct. Additionally, focusing on consistency, if the accommodation was made for one platform, the other three would have to be adjusted precisely to the same prompts also called shots, noting the amount of training data used at the prompt input. Steering was noted as a selection criterion, and it is essential to understand that too much flexibility can create potential jailbreaks where the AI moves away from some protectionary constraints established by OpenAI [48] or the platform [45]. Although there are topics within industrial distribution that border these constraints, nothing during the testing would cross any ethical boundaries.

4.3. Initial impressions of the AI-generated alternative persona

Starting with Copy.ai, the prompt was asked to create a persona based on the verbatim text of the Tolbert [15] industrial distribution leader fusion in its entirety of 838 words. The persona immediately returned with a name, age, and profession without requesting the creation. As noted earlier, personas can be presented in many ways with familiar themes: the fictitious name, age, gender, and title [4]. For consistency, the rest of the AI platforms were asked to produce a persona with the same name, age, and occupation. Copy.ai and Anyword returned with a persona with 20 years of experience working in industrial distribution, assuming the age and university education. Copy.ai mentions that Sarah, the fictitious person, joined the industry based on curiosity, and Anyword notes a bachelor’s degree in business with a minor in supply chain management. Still, the output of other platforms did not mention an origin directly or indirectly. In the original research, the industrial distributor leaders’ entrance to the domain was divided into three categories: random, friends and family, or educational program [15].

As the persona delves into the motivations, both Jasper and Writesonic gravitate to the struggle of traditional industries clashing with the modern leader as a priority and feature to establish a set of characteristics for the rest of the persona; yet, Copy.ai and Anyword discuss the challenge of building relationships and the struggle of losing the ability to influence. It is unknown why the two pairs of AI with similar NLG engines choose one direction versus the other as a key motivation of the simulated industrial leader. However, at this point, it is clear that the created personas have value to two of the Goel et al. [49] derived questions of information utility and ability to assist with

decisions as the shifting perspective, albeit with similar information, offers the impressions of newness. In some ways, it is surprising through differences; in others, it is somewhat underwhelming with generic responses.

The AI personas all move in unison to discuss noise, talent, and culture, as they seem to be a recurring theme in general business discussions and are not necessarily unique to industrial distribution. Only the Copy.ai persona moved into the character traits of the leader, discussing resilience, innovation, and empathetic leadership. For example, “Empathetic Leader: Sarah believes that a genuine understanding of her team’s and customer’s needs and aspirations is crucial to fostering a supportive and high-performing workplace culture” (para. 11). Interestingly, the notion of being empathetic was never used but implied by the original fusion. The rest of the personas follow the manual creation almost verbatim, with nothing else being remarkable (see Appendix A located in Figshare: <https://figshare.com/s/56306c9ce5aa2bba26ca>).

During the testing, there was perplexity regarding the reach of the platform across available digital information. As some insights were peculiar and not part of the original fusion, did the AI find information about the original publication or supporting literature? All four platforms were tested via the general prompt and correctly summarized the original work only if the entire title and author were added. If the prompted shot was shortened or elements were omitted, the AI would return generic information regarding leadership or industrial distribution.

Returning to hermeneutics specific to Ricoeur [13], noting the distance away from the original author, some novelty was created by the AI platforms. It is not a performance review, but Copy.ai created the legend and offered more insight into the original fusion, creating some distance. As the differences between the platforms became apparent, the questions surrounding the chosen GPT or homegrown model and the effects on the AI-generated output could not be attributed based on proprietary constraints. As noted earlier, OpenAI [48] indicated that GPT-4 was optimal. Yet, it is known that a paywall or algorithmic selection may obscure variations between the platforms and models. All the personas eventually moved into what Henrickson and Meroño-Peñuela [30] called neutrality, with no additional information outside the original 838 words. The next test set also complements these initial impressions with some further insight.

5. Application of Fusion Persona Through General AI Prompt

The next goal of the paper is to review the impressions of a practical application of the fusion persona used to create a sales and marketing strategy tracking industrial distribution leaders. There were many ways to execute the application within the four AI platforms. The user could create a target audience similar to what Anyword did, as seen in Figure 4, which is consistent with several other commercial AI platforms.

The applicationist could also use the process already described to create the alternative persona through the generic prompt and add the features needed to develop the required strategy. All platforms can also make a brand voice to learn the feature set and apply it to any assigned persona, allowing a repeatable utility. However, for this testing, consistent with the original questions and constraints, the generic prompt was chosen to develop strategies that align with creating an alternative persona.

5.1. The application and impressions of the strategy creation

A new CRM software company called FlowCRM (<https://flowcrm.com>) has agreed to allow the marketing copy on their website to be used as prompts for the AI generation through the four NLG platforms. The features of FlowCRM can be seen in Appendix B, located in Figshare (<https://figshare.com/s/56306c9ce5aa2bba26ca>). Keeping with the context of the previous tests, the testing process was to ask the prompt to create a sales and marketing strategy for Sarah Hamilton, an industrial distribution leader, aged 45 years, then input the original industrial distribution leader fusion and then the CRM feature set. The process is an enhanced shot representing a formulaic input.

Focusing on the original three questions, with the first impressions, Anyword and Jasper offered a noticeable amount of integrated information from the fusion persona within the crafted sales strategy, whereas Copy.ai and Writesonic created generic talking points from the FlowCRM features as if the persona were ignored, noted by some instances of previous research [30]. As a means to verify if the process was somehow interrupted or the data were ignored based on the steering constraint, the generation was repeated with similar results where the first sets were used in the analysis and included in Appendix C, located in Figshare (<https://figshare.com/s/56306c9ce5aa2bba26ca>), together with the other strategy outputs. With the underwhelming results, the continued analysis will focus on Anyword and Jasper.

In the Anyword advice, the introduction spoke to the alignment of the FlowCRM offerings with the needs of the industrial distribution leader:

To target a Distribution Leader effectively with the described features of a CRM system like FlowCRM, your strategy needs to align with their primary concerns and objectives, which include streamlining distribution channels, increasing sales efficiency, optimizing supply chain management, and improving customer relationships. (para. 1)

Jasper’s approach was similar and added the motivation of focus being the evolving role of distribution and leaders, “In an era where the complexities and demands of the industrial distribution sector have dramatically evolved, leaders are faced with challenges that require innovative and strategic responses” (para. 2). Both platforms move from the introduction directly into features of FlowCRM as tactics. Anyword seems to make a mistake regarding sales acceleration and the benefit of time to market, which is unlikely as industrial distributors are not developers of new products or software and are well known in the domain. Marketing automation and customer support are steered back toward cultivating and maintaining relationships by Anyword. Anyword, in finality, notes the following advice for FlowCRM:

Your promotional content should resonate with the challenges and aspirations of a Distribution Leader, making it evident how FlowCRM can streamline their operations, boost their sales and marketing efforts, and enhance customer support—all of which contribute to a stronger, more efficient distribution network. (para. 8)

Jasper offers the same feature points coupled with specific pain points referenced by the fusion but isolates the challenges differently:

The landscape of industrial distribution has shifted, presenting leaders with unprecedented challenges. These include navigating through an overwhelming amount of information, attracting and retaining talent, and maintaining a competitive edge amidst workforce and industry evolution. (para. 7)

Figure 4
Persona as a target audience via Anyword

The image shows a digital form for creating a persona. At the top, there's a text input field labeled 'Persona Name' containing 'Distribution Leader'. Below it, the 'Gender' section has three radio buttons: 'Female', 'Male', and 'Doesn't matter', with 'Doesn't matter' selected. The 'Age group' section features a horizontal slider ranging from 13 to 65+, with a blue dot positioned at 25. To the right of these settings is a circular avatar of a woman with black hair, and a 'Regenerate' button below it. The 'Pain points (optional)' section contains a text area with the instruction 'Describe the pain points of your target audience that relate to your product. Press the Enter key to save a pain point.' Below this is a list of pre-defined pain points in grey boxes with an 'x' icon: 'Decline of influence and authority', 'Outdated technology', 'Attracting and retaining talent', 'Doing more with less', 'Lack of industry training', 'Overwhelmed with diverse information', 'Inertia preventing change', 'Stagnant culture', and 'Lack of focus regarding brand'. At the bottom of this list is a '+ Add your own' button.

Note: This is an original figure created on the Anyword AI platform depicting a common template form of a persona.

The noted antidote for the challenges enumerated by Jasper is FlowCRM implementation, where the benefits can be realized. The conclusion was more definitive or causal in delivery than that of Anyword, where the conclusion was assistance in the journey and not the complete solution to all of the industrial distributors' needs and aspirations.

6. Conclusion and Final Thoughts

The results from the alternative AI-generated persona creation and the application to sell FlowCRM to industrial distributor leaders are as nuanced as the hermeneutic process demands the researcher to try and capture. The purpose of creating the alternative persona via AI was to understand if the system could make additional undiscovered connections to enhance the original fusion, showing the derivation from the original input source as a novel hermeneutic goal [13]. One of the apparent benefits was that the same summary was interpreted differently from the original writer, as the AI emphasized a different scaffolding of pain, needs, and goals. The minor inaccuracies were that the AI (imagining if the AI were another person tasked with summarizing the same data) was not from the same domain as the researcher, where bias is a critical component of the analysis.

The AI did not understand the distributor's promise or the distance from the customer between distributors, reps, or brands unless the AI was specifically taught these new patterns to integrate, not unlike normal machine learning processes [47]. The dumbness, or what Coeckelbergh [20] calls the naivety of AI, also requires a

warning where the patterns for less mainstream data become less accurate based on a lack of sample population. Conversely, too much specific information (steering) renders the output more neutral and not a jailbreak in this case of testing [30, 45]. As the platforms discuss the options of brand voice, the ability to apply many different data sources for direct pattern teaching may overcome some of the domain experience for the lack of better articulation.

Returning to the CRM application, the mischance of Copy.ai and Writesonic not seeming to work offers a negative for comparison as if the fusion was never applied compared to the outputs of Anyword and Jasper, which were significantly more sophisticated creating a wide gap between platforms in practical application. Anyword and Jasper articulated the needs and plight of industrial distribution leaders with two interesting degrees—meaning that Jasper had an absolute message of a solution almost on the verge of being too aggressive. In contrast, the Anyword output reads like an advice letter from a mentor working to aid FlowCRM in successfully penetrating a new market. What was missing from the analysis was how much of a fusion is required to enhance the resolution of the application outcome, as the results indicate zero to arguably 100%, echoing the results from Henrikson and Meroño-Peñuela [30] with their variations.

The platforms themselves create a series of unknown variables. As noted, the goal was never to grade or evaluate the platform but to offer diverse testing to see output variations. As the platforms all use a variant of the NLG engine, surrounding the few latest versions up to GPT-4, do the other proprietary models explain the differences in

persona creation and the CRM application specific to the derelict areas that are missing any novelty? Speculatively, akin to all machine learning and AI applications, baseline training seems apparent in the impressions, but it is unclear. ChatGPT was not used in the testing, and, as the widespread variant for publicly available AI, the selection required more of the noted purposive marketing-specific perspective. Other platforms regarding future research could obviously be deployed based on any application needs or research questions.

6.1. Additional applications for industrial distribution

The testing specific to industrial distribution leaders and a new CRM tool being marketed to distributors only account for a few possible applications of AI within the industrial distribution domain. Functionally, industrial distributors service customers in the maintenance and repair products or solutions used to retrofit or adapt to new processes surrounding manufacturing, OEM, and municipal operations, as noted in the distribution leader persona [15]. The distributor function was also described as being plagued by significant challenges, which the leader represented as pains that AI could, in many ways, remedy. From the beginning, the leaders described doing more with fewer resources, the inability to attract new talent to replace an aging workforce, and the lack of training. The ability to save time, automate processes, and act as a knowledgeable assistant are the primary benefits of AI being marketed through AI platforms.

One of the areas discussed from the original 17 interviews of industrial distribution leaders that created the fusion was the inconsistencies regarding marketing or sales leadership [15]. In many cases, sales and marketing strategies are not formalized, and, in some cases, the process is entirely emergent. Thus, AI could act as a bridge in creating strategies similar to Anyword or Jasper's methodical strategy for CRM sales. The ability to consistently create social media content is also an essential area of marketing that distributors struggle with, as the results, resembling digital marketing in general, do not fit into the classic return on investment calculation and have minimal understanding associated with the benefits, including branding.

Artificial intelligence, in general, outside the scope of this paper, can assist with decision-making on many additional levels but also brings greater pellucidity to stakeholders when given transparency through the data that AI has access to, broadening the training sets. Initiatives such as corporate social responsibility or green sustainability have leadership traction based primarily on corporate origin and the size of the organization associated with distribution. For example, AI can assist leaders in assessing and visualizing the social impacts of operations, minimizing the effects on the community, and noting a positive effect on organizational culture and performance [50].

6.2. Future research

The fundamental question this paper asked was, as domains requiring sales, marketing, and product development embrace AI, can the needed AI personas benefit from a hermeneutic approach to creation? The answer is yes, in many ways. Critically, most of the inherent weaknesses of a persona noted by critics can be mitigated by hermeneutics specific to bias, replication, and validity to a greater extent. Time, however, is something that cannot be liberated, and the hermeneutic approach creates the proper tension through the process that requires investment. By default, the applicationist creates a

higher-resolution persona when creating the hermeneutic fusion of horizons. The persona can be replicated and modified as needed based on utility. An additional benefit is that, through the process of creation, the applicationist fosters emergent techniques that better fit research or novel aspirations to their needs. Benefits aside, through the process of creating the fusion and the testing, a few critical comparisons were noted needing analysis:

- 1) Comparison of an example fusion-based persona with an AI-generated persona used for the same application.
- 2) Comparison of canned application processes for creating brand and customer voices via the NLG platform.
- 3) Comparison of data-based persona with AI-based persona.

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Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at <https://figshare.com/s/56306c9ce5aa2bba26ca>.

Author Contribution Statement

Carl Lee Tolbert: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration.

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