

Grassroots Football Development in Japan: A Case Study

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Abstract: Grassroots football is gaining importance at various levels with programmes run by global, continental, regional, national, and local football associations. However, there has been very little research on the development and significance of football at the lower level. Therefore, in this study, the researchers attempted to examine the mechanisms of successful grassroots football programmes in Japan. A survey was used to examine the current status of 47 prefectural football associations in Japan in terms of grassroots football development. Then, a total of 33 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel in, or out of, the 10 most successful prefectural football associations to collect in-depth data in grassroots football development. A total of 14 determinants for successful grassroots football development were identified. The determinants were examined and four themes were formed, namely governance, stakeholders, programmes, and strategy. Finally, a house model was introduced to help to understand the mechanisms of successful grassroots football programmes in Japan. It is hoped that the findings will help stakeholders involved in grassroots football development to understand the mechanisms of grassroots football development programmes, which is important to design their own successful grassroots football programmes.

Keywords: grassroots football; development; Japan; football association.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grassroots football is fundamental to football. It is a fundamental part of top level football as well as all aspects related to football. Grassroots football is about participation at the recreational level [1], therefore all players, including well-known star football players, started playing football at the grassroots level while the limited numbers of players can move from the basic level to the elite and professional level [2]. It is gaining importance at various levels of the code with programmes run by a variety of organizations including global, continental, regional, national, and local football associations.

There are different viewpoints and focus from different regions or countries across the world in terms of the definition and explanation of grassroots football. For example, one of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)'s grassroots philosophies stated that football should be for everyone regardless of age, gender, religions, and level of fitness while its primary focus in grassroots football development is to promote football for boys and girls aged six to 12 years through the community, school, and club initiatives [3]. The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) set its focus on enhancing children's playing abilities and techniques and initiated development programmes in the 2000s. However, the AFC recently started to approach grassroots football in the same way as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), and defined that all football, except for elite and professional players, is part of grassroots football [4]. In this study, football for children from age six to 12 years old is focused, following the primary focus of the FIFA in grassroots football, although there are different viewpoints and focus in grassroots football development depending on regions or countries.

The importance of grassroots football has received heightened attention by the JFA. After hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2002, the JFA started to re-focus on promoting grassroots football and added it to their concept of football development, namely the 'Trinity of strengthening of the national team,

youth development, and coach education' (Sanmi-ittai) [5]. The JFA started programmes to promote children's football especially focusing on players aged six to 10 years old in 2003. By increasing the number of children who play football, they strengthen the base of Japanese football. The JFA especially focused on 47 prefectural football associations as a key stakeholder to promote children's football [6]. As a result of the JFA's initiatives with cooperation of prefectural football associations in this area, the number of registered players under 12 years old increased by 16,178 players (growth of about 6%) from 2003 (262,956 players) to 2017 (279,134 players). And, the JFA won the AFC's 'The Best Member Association for Grassroots Football' in 2013 [7] and 'President Recognition Award for Grassroots Football' in 2015 [4].

Some researchers have examined the development of sport at the micro-level focusing on psychological factors such as player motivation in, and commitment to, a sport activity [8-10]. Others have studied the development of sport at the nano-level focusing on sport participation or elite development [11-13]. Some researchers have focused on grassroots football for the study of development through sport as a powerful tool which is able to contribute to the development of society [14, 15]. Despite the importance of successful grassroots football development, its development has not been systematically studied and therefore the mechanisms associated with successful grassroots football programmes are not clear. Therefore, the main aim of the study is to examine the mechanisms of successful grassroots football programmes in Japan by identifying determinants, understanding their contexts, and analysing any difficulties in order to overcome their obstacles.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study1

2.1.1 Method

The focus is on assessing the status of prefectural football associations in terms of grassroots football development. A survey was used to examine the current status of 47 prefectural football associations in Japan in terms of grassroots football development. The evaluation criteria were identified and the survey questions were developed on the basis of the identified evaluation criteria.

2.1.2 Participants

The targeted population of Study 1 was personnel in charge of grassroots football development in all 47 prefectural football associations in Japan. A total of 24 participants consisted of 14 FA Kids Committee Chairpersons (58%), four FA Chief Kids Leader Instructors (17%), two General Secretaries (8%), one Deputy FA Kids Committee Chairperson (4%), one FA Kids Committee member (4%), one Technical Director (4%), and one person in charge of the Kids Elite Programme under a prefectural football association (4%). The FA Kids Committee is responsible for the development of football for children especially focusing on six to 10 years old children. A Kids Leader Instructor is an instructor in a football coaching course named the Official Kids Leader Training Course, which is a course to train football coaches for young children. A Technical Director or Youth Director is in charge of the entire football development on the administration side within a prefectural football association.

2.1.3 Evaluation Criteria

In this research project, the evaluation criteria to assess the successful level of prefectural football associations in grassroots football development are framed on the basis of the theoretical perspectives of organizational effectiveness. Due to their organizational characteristics, prefectural football associations are evaluated from a multidimensional perspective using three models of organization effectiveness such as the goals model [16], the system resource model [17], and the process model [18]. A sport association has several responsibilities as a governing body of a respective sport with more than one domain of activity, such as elite development [19,20] and mass participation [21,22]. In the domain of mass participation, the organizational goals include increasing participation, organizing competitions, providing technical services, and implementing promotional programmes. A multidimensional approach may be relevant to be applied to assess the effectiveness of prefectural football associations because of the difficulty in exclusively applying any one goal [16,23]. A multidimensional approach is based on an open system view of organizations to achieve a

comprehensive evaluation of organization performance from different points in the inputs-throughout-outputs cycle [23-25]. Therefore, evaluation criteria were developed by focusing on elements in relation to resource acquisition, internal process, and outcomes achieved by organizations.

The criteria consists of four components, namely organizational structure, network and partnership with external stakeholders, actual operation of the programmes and the provision of technical, physical and promotional services, and number of the participants in grassroots football activities. The evaluation components were developed based on evaluation criteria on the performance of sport governing organizations. Organizational structure is represented by four sub-elements, namely human resources, management, strategic planning, and financial stability [26-29]. Network and partnership with governments, international, national, and local sport institutions, leagues, clubs, and schools is an important evaluation criterion [26,27,30-33]. Programmes and services include facilities, coach education, elite pathways, and competitions [27,31,32]. Finally, the number of children involved in football can be considered as an indicator of successful grassroots football development activities because one of the main objectives in developing sports is to increase the number of participants involved in sport activities [30,34]. Table 1 shows the evaluation components and their sub-elements.

Table1. Evaluation Components, Sub-elements for the Successful Level of Prefectural Football Associations in Grassroots Football Development

Component	Sub-Element
1. Organizational Structure	1.1 Human resources
	1.2 Management
	1.3 Strategic planning
	1.4 Financial stability
2. Network and Partnership with External Stakeholders	2.1 Governmental organization
	2.2 Non-governmental organization
	2.3 School, community and clubs
3. Actual Operation of the Programmes and Provision of Technical, Physical and Promotional Services	3.1 Promotional activities
	3.2 Facilities
	3.3 Coach education
	3.4 Elite programme
	3.5 Competition
4. Number of Participants in Grassroots Football Activities	4.1 Number of participants in grassroots football activities under the football association

2.1.4 Data Analysis

Each sub-element is equally given one point with a total of 13 points for the survey. Points are given based on the existence of the elements. For example, if a prefectural football association has a strategic development plan, one point was given.

The participants gave information on the number of staff involved in grassroots development, promotional activities, coach education courses, and registered players aged from six to 12 years under their respective prefectural football association. The number of staff involved with grassroots football development (Human resources) varied from zero to 25. The number of grassroots football activities (Promotional activities) ranged from one to 800. In regard to coach education, the minimum number of grassroots coach education courses was zero and the maximum number was 10. The number of players aged from six to 12 years registered with a prefectural football association varied from 1,573 to 18,073. As the number varied and included extreme values such as 800 in the number of grassroots football activities and 18,073 in the number of registered players, they were divided into quartiles. A set of the data of the sub-elements are ordered from the lowest to the highest and divided into four quarters by three quartiles (Q1, Q2 and Q3). Table 2 shows the points given for each quarter.

Table2. Allocation of Points for Survey

	1.1 Human resources	3.1 Promotional activities	3.3 Coach education	4.1 Number of participants
Data set	0, 1, 2, 4, 5, 5, 6, 10, 10, 11, 13, 15, 15, 15, 15, 15, 15, 15, 20, 25	1, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 4, 5, 5, 6, 15, 20, 74, 500, 600, 800	0, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 4, 5, 5, 5, 6, 6, 8, 10	1573, 2500, 2521, 3000, 3000, 3200, 4600, 5085, 5171, 5200, 6200, 9846, 18073

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First quartile (Q1)	5	3	1	2760.5
Second quartile (Q2)	13	4	3	4600
Third quartile (Q3)	15	17.5	5	5700
Points given 0 – Q1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25
Points given Q1 – Q2	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Points given Q2 – Q3	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.75
Points given Q3 – Q4	1	1	1	1

2.1.5 Results

The scores from the survey were tabulated and ranked. Scores ranged from 2 (Yamaguchi prefecture) to 11.5 (A) out of a total of 13. The detailed breakdown of the scores is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Scores from the Survey

Rank	Association	Human resources	Management	Strategic planning	Financial stability	Governmental organization	Non-governmental organization	School, community and clubs	Promotional activities	Facilities	Coach education	Elite program	Competition	Number of participants	Total
1	A	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	0	11.5
2	B	0.75	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.75	1	1	1	0	1	10.5
3	C	0.75	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.75	1	0.25	1	0	0.5	9.25
3	D	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	0	0.25	9.25
5	E	0.75	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	8.75
6	F	0.75	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.75	1	0.25	1	0	0.25	8
7	G	0.5	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0.5	1	0	0.75	7.75
7	H	0.25	1	1	1	0	0	0	0.5	1	0.75	1	0	0.25	7.75
9	I	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0.5	0	0.25	1	1	0.75	7.5
10	J	0.5	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.5	1	0.25	0	1	0	7.25
10	K	0.75	1	1	1	1	0	0	0.5	1	0	1	0	1	7.25
10	L	0.75	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.25	0	0.25	1	0	1	7.25
13	M	0.5	1	0	0	1	1	1	0.5	1	0.75	1	0	0	6.75
13	N	0.5	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.25	1	0	1	0	0	6.75
15	O	0.75	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0.75	1	0	0	6.5
16	P	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.25	0	0.5	0	0	1	6.25
16	Q	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0.25	1	0.5	1	0	0.5	6.25
18	R	0.75	1	1	0	0	0	0	0.5	0	0.25	1	1	0.5	6
19	S	0.5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.75	1	1	1	0	0	5.25
20	T	0.25	1	0	1	1	0	0	0.25	0	1	1	0	0	4.5
20	U	0.5	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.25	0	0.75	1	0	0	4.5
22	V	0.75	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.5	0	0.5	1	0	0	3.75
22	W	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.25	1	0	0.5	3.75
24	X	0.25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.25	0	0.5	1	0	0	2

2.2 Study 2

2.2.1 Method

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain core data based on the views and experiences by people who were involved in the delivery of grassroots football development programmes by their respective prefectural football associations.

2.2.2. Participants

The targeted population of Study 2 was personnel who were regularly involved in the delivery of grassroots football programmes by 10 successful prefectural football associations. The 10 associations were selected from the ranking (Refer to Table 3), which were the associations A, B, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, and L. A total of 33 people participated in the interview, who included 11 Kids Leader Instructors (33%), nine coaches (27%), eight FA Kids Committee Chairpersons (24%), two FA General Secretaries (6%), two FA Youth Directors (6%), and one referee (3%).

2.2.3. Interview Questions

The interview consists of seven open-ended questions in order to collect in-depth data through an elaboration of responses by the interviewees. The interview questions are shown below:

- What is your role in the grassroots football development programmes?
- What are your prefectural football association’s goals in grassroots football development?
- What do you/your prefectural football association do to achieve the goals?
- What do you think about grassroots football?
- From your experience, what is important for grassroots football development?
- Do you face any problems in grassroots football programmes? If so, what are the problems and what was done?
- What will you do for further development of grassroots football?

2.2.4. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the QSR NVivo 10 software. All the transcripts were read for familiarisation and coded to identify determinants in successful grassroots football programmes. It was felt that saturation had been reached during analysing data from the later 17 interviews after the first 16 interviews were conducted.

3. RESULTS

Participants expressed various issues related to grassroots football development. A total of 14 core categories of determinants were identified. Details of the core categories are shown in Table 4.

Table4. Codes for the Determinants

	Core categories	Sources	Codes
1	Coach Education	23	38
2	Collaboration	20	34
3	Coaches	20	31
4	Visiting Kindergartens	19	29
5	Human Resources	17	29
6	Parents	15	21
7	Approach to children	14	19
8	Benefits of participation	12	17
9	Clubs	10	13
10	Festivals	10	13
11	Finance	10	12
12	Competitions	9	13
13	Vision and philosophy	8	8
14	Schools	2	3

After examination, the core categories were refined and further developed to form themes of determinants considering the features of each core category and relationship between them. As a result, four themes were formed. They are Governance, Stakeholders, Programmes, and Strategy. A thematic map on determinants in successful grassroots football programmes is shown in Figure 1.

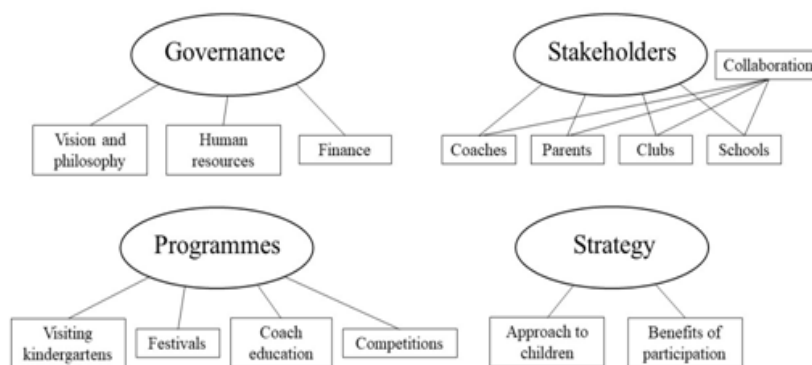


Figure1. Map of the Four Themes of Determinants in Successful Grassroots Football Programmes

4. DISCUSSION

Participants in this study highlighted the value and importance of governance, stakeholders, and strategies in running successful grassroots football development programmes. They also revealed how grassroots programmes have been implemented by stakeholders, which was influenced by the relationships among stakeholders and strategic approaches.

Governance was found to be one of the themes of determinants in grassroots football development. This finding was supported both by internal stakeholders who belong to prefectural football associations (including their staff and Kids Committee members) and by external stakeholders who do not belong to associations but are involved in associations' grassroots football development programmes (such as the Kids Leader Instructors). Previous studies on governance in sports have highlighted the importance of improving the governance of sport associations for improved operation of their functions [21, 22]. In particular, Hoehn [21] argued that governance is important because the functions of sport associations are becoming complicated due to the number of stakeholders involved. In grassroots football, there are various people involved, who have their own priorities and ways of thinking. Participants in this study stated that the key is to work together in unity with a central vision and philosophy in grassroots football development.

The value of human resources including staff in prefectural football associations, coaches, and volunteers was also found to be one of the determinants in the running of successful grassroots football development programmes. The values and roles of those human resources and stakeholders in the development of sport have been recognized by previous studies on sport governing bodies and sport development. According to Shilbury et al. [35], there were a variety of key stakeholders in the development of sport such as government, sport clubs, and local/national sports associations. Among those stakeholders, sport associations specially played an important role in the development of sport to promote respective sports and to increase the popularity accordingly [21]. In fact, participants in this study stressed the importance of ensuring that staff in prefectural football associations were capable of supporting grassroots football development programmes, including organizing activities, communicating with stakeholders, and ensuring facilities. They also admitted that coaches are vital stakeholders in grassroots football development because coaches have various roles at the frontline of grassroots football development [22]. Some researchers highlighted that parents are also important stakeholders in grassroots football development because they play an important role in enrolling children and encouraging them to stay in sport activities [10, 34].

Programmes were found to be one of the themes of determinants in successful grassroots football development in Japan as it is important to conduct programmes to attract participants in sport and recreational activities [30, 35]. Four initiatives by prefectural football associations such as the visiting kindergartens programme, festivals, coach education programmes, and competitions were included in the theme. Visiting kindergartens is a programme which provides opportunities for children under six years to play football. Prefectural football associations send coaches to kindergartens to organize physical activity sessions using football. The association G conducted about a thousand football activities in kindergartens in the prefecture every year. Over 25,000 children enjoyed physical activities using football in the activities. The association H delivered about 60 football activities to 1,600 children on average every year. Festivals are an event to invite a large number of participants to enjoy playing small-sided football games. Several small size football pitches are usually prepared, and participants move to each pitch to play football with different opponents. The association B organized 145 festivals from 2012 to 2016 which involved 43,459 children. On average, about 30 festivals were organized every year. The association G was also active in organizing festivals with 22 festivals a year which involved 4,301 children.

As football associations in Japan recognized the importance of investing in programmes to educate coaches and volunteers, the JFA established and authorized prefectural football associations to organize the D License Course and the Kids Leader Course in 2013 to educate coaches and parents on how to coach football to children as well as how to deal with children appropriately. The data on the number of coaches holding the qualifications on the JFA's website showed that there were 45,319 coaches holding the D license in 2017 [36], which is 56% of the total number of qualified coaches registered by the JFA (80,308). The results of this study also showed that competitions provided children with regular opportunities to enjoy football games, which is important to retain children in

football activities because playing matches is often a strong motivation for players to stay in sport activities [30]. Hoehn [21] highlighted the possible impact of competitions in promoting sports and suggested that sport associations should schedule competitions to maximize the impact. In Japan, one of the key focuses of prefectural football associations is to promote competitions in a league format rather than a tournament format at the grassroots level because a league format provides children with more opportunities to play football matches regularly. Promoting competitions in a league format had an effect with prefectural football associations establishing leagues for players under 12 years old.

In addition to the number of activities at the grassroots level, it seemed that an emphasis on the quality of activities has also been focused on in Japan. For example, the JFA stressed the importance of ensuring that children have fun during football activities because fun is a motivation for children. The literature recognized that fun is one of the significant motives for people to enjoy sports and to stay in sports activities [9, 34, 37]. Berg et al. [37] highlighted that programmes should provide an enjoyable experience to attract and retain participants in sport activities. An important philosophy to ensure children have fun during football activities has been successfully delivered in prefectural football associations and coaches at the front line of grassroots football development. The results from this study revealed that it influenced coaches to let children play and to encourage with correct words rather than coaching too much in order to ensure children have fun. Participants in this study also highlighted that the quality of programmes depends on maximizing learning opportunities for children. Educational values have been recognized in sport in educating people to develop life skills and improve individual attitudes, character, confidence, and self-efficacy [38]. The values are benefits gained by participants from their involvement in sport [15, 38, 39] and the benefits, including friendship, recognition, and social interaction, are part of the motives for people to remain in sport activities [40]. As many participants in this study admitted, coaches strategically approached children to provide them with an enjoyable experience and learning opportunities during football activities. Those strategic elements helped to improve the quality of programmes, which attract participants to stay in football activities. And, the quality of programmes and the numbers of participants can support prefectural football associations to obtain the income from sponsorship for programmes. Participants in this study explained some successful experiences obtaining sponsorship deals with strategic approaches. Hoehn [21] and Wicker and Breuer [41] highlighted sponsorship deals in relation to the organizing of sports programmes as one of the important income sources for sport associations. In addition, membership fees were also recognized as another income source for sport associations [21,28]. In Japan, prefectural football associations have focused on gaining income from entry fees for activities. After a free trial, prefectural football associations have made efforts to attract kindergartens to continue with the visiting kindergarten programme although they must pay for activities. Again, the quality of activities is the key to keep their interest. It can conclude that the quality of programmes helps associations to ensure one income source which supports an association's financial stability.

Although it has been revealed that successful prefectural football associations conducted various programmes with large numbers of activities and efforts to ensure the quality, they face many problems in grassroots football programmes due to the limited resources. One of the resources lacking is coaches. As mentioned, coaches are at the frontline of grassroots football programmes and participants in this study stated that the success of programmes could depend on coaches. The lack of coaches affects not only the organization of festivals and football sessions in kindergartens but also the running of competitions. In fact, some prefectural football associations have been struggling in managing football leagues for children due to the lack of coaches. One of the reasons which causes the lack of coaches is that many coaches do not become active in participating in grassroots football activities after their coach education courses. Participants in this study stated two strategies to solve the problem. One strategy is to focus on selecting appropriate candidates who potentially become active coaches. For example, prefectural football associations identified kindergarten and elementary school teachers and players in high school football teams as potential active coaches. Another strategy is to track the graduated coaches and keep encouraging their involvement in football activities continuously, which also assists them to improve the quality of their coaching. The results of this study showed a collaboration is also suggested as a key strategy to solve the lack of coaches. It is about a collaboration among internal stakeholders within a prefectural football association crossing over the categories such as the Kids category, Category 1, Category 2, Category 3, and Category 4. Under the situation in grassroots football in Japan, the collaboration between the Kids category and

Category 4 is important to maximize the usage of the limited existing human resources including coaches. According to the results of this study, a collaboration is also crucial to solve another problem in relation to opportunities to play football. A collaboration with schools and local government allows facilities to be used for football activities as it is a challenge for one prefectural football association to handle securing an adequate number of facilities in its respective area. A collaboration with clubs can support sharing the information about football events, teams, and clubs, which will help children to find opportunities to play football.

After examination of the features of each theme of determinants in successful grassroots football development programmes by prefectural football associations, a house model of grassroots football development was developed to explain the relationship between the themes. A house model is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. House model of grassroots football development in successful prefectural football associations in Japan

Programmes are part of a main body of the house because programmes are the main components to achieve development in grassroots football. Football associations are not able to achieve the main aim of grassroots football development, which is to increase participation in football, without programmes. Stakeholders are also another part of a main body of the house because they are the main components in the implementation of programmes. They are linked each other because programmes are not run without stakeholders and educational programmes are required to ensure the quality and quantity of stakeholders. Governance is a fundamental part of the house supporting programmes and stakeholders because good governance is required for prefectural football associations to conduct programmes and to ensure the quality and quantity of stakeholders. Clear vision, sufficient quality and quantity of human resources, and sustainable financial resources are crucial for regular and continuous implementation of programmes with the ensured quality. Finally, the strategy is a part of the house to make entire circumstances in grassroots football development be better by solving problems and supporting effective implementation of programmes. The strategy is also required to support governance in finance and human resources. The house of grassroots football development can stand stably if the four themes exist in good balance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Although some limitations were recognized, the findings from the study are promising and will help stakeholders involved in grassroots football development to understand the mechanisms of grassroots football development programmes, which is important to design their own successful grassroots football programmes. Furthermore, the evaluation criteria to assess the successful level of prefectural football associations in grassroots football development are framed on the basis of the theoretical perspectives on organizational effectiveness, and the components are developed based on evaluation criteria on the performance of sport governing organizations. The evaluation criteria may provide

scholars with a framework to assess the effectiveness of football associations. This section is not mandatory but can be added to the manuscript if the discussion is unusually long or complex.

6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, Masahiro Sugiyama; writing—review and editing, supervision, Jorge Diaz-Cidoncha Garcia. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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8. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UM.TNC2/RC/H&E/UMREC-73, 17 August 2015).

9. INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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11. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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