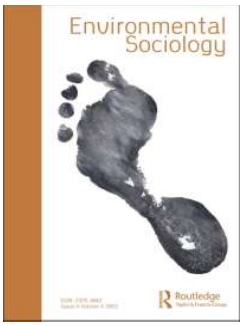

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The emergency will last a long time: hyperabjection, slow violence, and the enduring politics of waste in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dimensions of hyperabjection and slow violence in the context of the 'garbage emergency' in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, particularly in relation to the closure of the province's largest landfill in Piyungan. Urban centres in Indonesia often externalize their waste problem to suburban 'sacrifice zones' wherein informal workers with minimal protection manage massive volumes of untreated waste. We argue that this reflects a deeper systemic condition marked by socio-spatial inequality and environmental injustice that is left obscured by ontological and ideological framings that typically inform local government, media, and other social actors, particularly affecting peripheral communities as a result. Drawing on the concept of *hyperobject* proposed by Timothy Morton and the political rearticulation of that concept in terms of the *hyperabject* by Mikkel Krause Frantze and Jens Bjering, we show how the 'garbage emergency' framing in the case of Yogyakarta's waste problem both results from and helps to perpetuate structural conditions shaped by neglect and disavowal – an outcome we characterize using Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence'. Ultimately, this article suggests waste be rethought, not as a discrete problem of disposal, but as a socio-ecological crisis that demands more than techno-bureaucratic solutions.

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Introduction

While waste management is a global challenge that emerges due to the increasingly diverse characteristics of waste and the lack of consistent policy implementation, it has especially impacted developing countries (Ferronato and Torretta 2019), owing to the lack therein of cooperation between stakeholders; various institutional, infrastructural, and bureaucratic shortcomings; and an often *ad hoc* and uncoordinated approach to waste management (Mmereki, Baldwin, and Li 2016). Indonesia is no exception to this overall trend. A developing country embedded in a growth-oriented development paradigm heavily reliant on strategic and extractive sectors, Indonesia is also increasingly marked by patterns of overconsumption (Leksono and He 2025; Waluyo and Kharisma 2023).

Common responses to the waste crisis in Indonesia tend to fall into three broad categories. First, there are pedagogical approaches that emphasize gradual change through increased public awareness (Firdaus 2025; Tanjung 2024). Second, reformist efforts focus on legal and institutional restructuring, particularly strengthening enforcement mechanisms and addressing regulatory shortcomings. This includes the call for clearly defined circular economy standards (Azizah 2024; Waluyo and Kharisma 2023). Third, some scholars adopt a diagnostic perspective through policy analysis, aiming to assess the effectiveness of existing strategies for waste minimization (Damanhuri 2004; Karjoko et al. 2022). Regardless, in practice, efforts to implement these policies tend to reveal asymmetries between national directives and regional realities, owing to factors such as the heterogeneous composition of waste, limited availability of landfill sites, divergent preferences in waste disposal methods, and uneven institutional capacity (Meidiana and Gamse 2010).

An array of existing literature on waste from localities outside Indonesia brings into view dimensions of waste frequently neglected by Indonesia's policy- and technology-oriented domestic literature, such as uneven power relations, temporal injustices, and contested urban governance in which waste is variously

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embedded. Njeru's (2006) study of plastic bag waste in Nairobi, Kenya, demonstrates how everyday waste practices intersect with political-economic structures to produce unequal urban ecologies. Cornea, Véron, and Zimmer (2017) reveal how the 'clean city' politics in West Bengal, India, mask deeper struggles over labour, class, and the invisibilized actors who sustain waste infrastructures. Adelina and Archer's (2024) work on the political ecology of plastics recycling in Bangkok, Thailand, foregrounds the situated, labour-intensive practices that shape urban waste metabolisms while exposing the socio-environmental vulnerabilities borne by informal workers. This line of critical inquiry is furthered in Hawkins's (2006) discussion of the capacity of waste to disrupt modern separations between purity and pollution in ways that are ethically relevant; T. Davies's (2022) reflections on 'toxic geographies' and slow violence; and contributions to the edited volume *Waste as a Critique* (Corvellec 2025), such as Wang and Wang's (2025) study of extended temporalities of exposure and dispossession in China's 'production wastescapes'.

Studies of anti-incineration politics have stressed how resistance to waste-to-energy facilities is shaped by power asymmetries, contested governance, and uneven exposure to environmental harm. Johnson's (2013) study of Beijing shows the limits of top-down strategies in the face of local opposition, highlighting how state-led technological fixes fail to address underlying trust deficits and distributive concerns. Similar dynamics emerge in Ireland (A. R. Davies 2005, 2006), where anti-incineration campaigns articulate deeper anxieties about state accountability and the socio-spatial distribution of risk. Mailund, Simonsen, and Ejsing (2025) show how toxic displacements at a Danish chemical waste site illuminate the transnational logic of environmental injustice, demonstrating that hazardous exposures and their political contestations traverse different political systems. These concerns resonate with findings from globally recognized pollution hotspots, such as Agbogbloshie in Ghana, where environmental informal e-waste workers are subjected to environmental injustice (Akese and Little 2018) and Guiyu, China, where contested 'worldings' of e-waste implicate nonhuman agencies and the precarious labour of scavengers within toxic landscapes (Wang, Qian, and He 2021).

Based on the preceding overview of existing literature, we identify conceptual limitations of the waste management discourse in Indonesia, whose pragmatic orientation has tended to exclude sustained discussions on how waste is produced, imagined, and governed. Taking a step toward expanding the focus and scope of the waste discourse in Indonesia, in this paper, we turn to what has been called *darurat sampah* or 'garbage emergency' in the central Javanese province of Yogyakarta.

Owing to the reputation of Yogyakarta City (Kota Yogyakarta) as a city of traditional art and culture – it is close to the UNESCO Heritage sites of Borobudur and Prambanan, and the city's layout ('cosmological axis') and landmarks themselves have been inscribed onto the World Heritage List in 2023 – the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Province) ranks among the most popular tourist destinations in Indonesia, with the total number of visitors surpassing 30 million in 2024 (BPS 2025a). Home also to over a hundred institutions of tertiary education that attract more than 100000 students from outside the province every year (BPS 2025b), Yogyakarta Province – whose population surpassed 3.75 million in 2024 – has experienced significant urban and peri-urban expansion, with densely populated zones sprawling from Yogyakarta City into the adjacent regencies (*kabupaten*) of Sleman and Bantul.[1]

Tourism, served by over 2000 hotels and other lodgings,[2] has often been responsible for spikes in waste production in Yogyakarta. During the end-of-year holiday in December 2024, Yogyakarta City sent a total of 2830 tons of waste from tourist activities in just a few days to the province's largest landfill in Piyungan, around 11 km southeast of the city (Hartik and Pangaribowo 2025) – the lack of alternative infrastructure forcing a temporary lifting of the supposed permanent closure of the landfill in May 2024 due to overcapacity. While excess garbage that piles up on the streets of Indonesia's only active sultanate at such instances of infrastructural shortage provides the local government and media visual indicators of a 'garbage emergency' that calls for urgent action, we argue that such 'emergency' framing overlooks an important *ontological* dimension of waste.

To elaborate the ethical, political, and ecological stakes of that dimension, we draw on object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton's concept of the *hyperobject*, Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Bjering's (2020) extension of Morton's thought with that of the *hyperabject* and Rob Nixon's (2011; see also Ahmann 2018) notion of *slow violence*. Our rearticulation of Yogyakarta's garbage emergency through these concepts – whose relation to waste is further elaborated in the next section – aims to highlight why and how attempts to solve or 'fix' the problem of waste tend to fall short, producing instead divisions between areas cleansed of

waste and peripheral areas 'sacrificed' to receive the urban waste that, in the end, can never be removed from existence without spatial and temporal trace. Adapting Frantzen and Bjering's (2020) critical supplement to Morton, we argue that the neglect or ideological disavowal of the 'hyperobjective' dimension of garbage – i.e. its being a complex and entangled entity that defies clear temporal and spatial boundaries, therefore resistant to straightforward solutions for elimination or expulsion – constitutes a condition of 'hyperabjection', whose detrimental effect is manifest as a kind of slow violence that unfolds gradually and unevenly, deepening social, ecological, and psychological vulnerabilities over time.

Waste and hyperobjects

While efforts to improve landfill control standards since the 1970s have seen some success at reducing toxic emissions (Wilson et al. 2024), it remains the case globally that almost one-third of the total municipal waste generated is not transported and processed according to ideal management, and around 42% of municipal waste is dumped in uncontrolled landfills, openly burned, or leaked into the environment with health and climate impacts (Maalouf and Mavropoulos 2023). As evinced by Chaine et al.'s (2023) comparative study of plastic waste recycling in Scotland and Uruguay, Akther et al.'s (2024) research on the persistence of incineration in waste management in Bangladesh, and Mukwevho et al.'s (2024) analysis of the blind spots of South African policy initiatives and regulatory frameworks, countries of the Global South face additional difficulties in tackling the problem of waste compared to those of the Global North, often due to the lack of financial and institutional support toward developing cleaner and more efficient waste management systems and the difficulty of securing land for landfill sites. In the absence of clear practical alternatives, investing in incineration technology potentially serves to maintain the image of a government that attempts to offer tangible solutions to the problem of waste management.

Another major difference between the Global North and the Global South is perhaps the deeper entanglement of waste in the local economy and everyday life in the latter. Millington and Lawhon (2018, 1056) suggest that '[t]hroughout the Global South, waste disposal is constructed as a means of job creation, economic development, and community uplift'. This is not limited to formal, regulated waste management – as evidenced by informal communities that emerge around landfills and initiatives, such as 'waste bank' in Indonesia, where the notion that waste and the evaluation for personal economic benefit are widespread (Fukuda et al. 2018; Kristanto, Kemala, and Nandhita 2022). Schlehe and Yulianto (2020) have suggested that plastic and other household waste in both rural and urban Yogyakarta – the primary site of our research – are entangled with Javanese everyday practices and culturally specific ways of relating to the environment. While government campaigns may encourage sorting and recycling, it is often community-based, bottom-up initiatives, including waste banks, neighbourhood clean-ups, and creative 'recycle fashion' carnivals, that mobilize local moral economies, social obligations, and affective ties. As noted by Fukuda et al. (2018); however, such culturally grounded entanglements with waste may also explain local resistance toward more formal, modernized waste management.

Despite the proximity or entanglement of waste or abject things and human inhabitants that characterize the waste-human relation in Indonesia, much of the domestic literature on waste management fails to consider what Lucy Bell (2018) has described from a new materialist perspective as 'the livingness and agency of material rejects' (98), which Bell argues is necessary to understand the 'lived experience of waste from the global south' (113). It can be argued that this article is motivated precisely by the need to introduce a more *ontological* conceptual perspective into discussions of waste in the Indonesian context. Taking methodological inspiration from poststructuralist discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Glynos et al. 2021), we attempt to achieve this aim through a redescription or horizontal *rearticulation*, of the garbage emergency through key conceptual terms drawn from object-oriented ontology and ideology studies.

To highlight the ontological dimension of garbage in Indonesia, we draw on the notion of the *hyperobject* introduced by the object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton (2013). In the broadest terms, a hyperobject is definable as an object, so massively 'distributed in time and space relative to humans, as to make human perception, as well as cognitive grasp of the object, difficult (Morton 2013, 1–2). The 'paralyzing scale' of hyperobjects is such that it 'locates human beings (both as individuals and as groups) in a precarious position due to their reduced relative importance' (Rueda 2022, 382). As Daniel Rueda (2022, 382) writes, an

encounter with a hyperobject can trigger 'a sensation of political impotence and a sort of epistemic cosmic horror'. This is because, while we may feel partly responsible for the genesis and problematic consequences of at least some hyperobjects – such as global warming, garbage, and the capitalist economic system – we are 'not equipped with the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events' (Latour 2014, 1).

While the concept of hyperobject facilitates a rethinking of many pertinent issues of the Anthropocene, including the 'garbage emergency' in Yogyakarta, what has not been fully elaborated by Morton is the implication of the fact that the 'we' that Morton addresses is not a homogeneous whole. If global warming, nuclear radiation, and garbage are hyperobjects from which 'we' cannot separate ourselves, 'we' are not *in* them equally. Acknowledging the apolitical implications of neglecting this *differential* aspect (one that Marxism maps onto class structure), which has been noted by critics of the 'speculative realist' movement of which Morton's object-oriented ontology is a representative (Galloway 2013), Frantzen and Bjering (2020) have proposed to supplement Morton's account of the hyperobject with that of the *hyperabject*. With the notion of the hyperabject, Frantzen and Bjering orient our attention to the differential and uneven consequences of hyperobjects and human attempts to master them.

In our view, the emergence of the differential detrimental effects of hyperobjects – what we may call 'hyperabjection' – is inseparable from the modern discourse of governance that tends to prioritize the state and the society's capacity to 'manage' crises or 'rebound' following disruptive events (Demiroz 2017). In other words, even though a reckoning with hyperobjects may engender a sense of powerlessness and an inability to formulate practical or political responses, social actors – the regional government, NGOs, academics, and so on – nevertheless are driven to always attempt *something* in the wake of hyperobjects. In short, *some* 'fix' tends to be offered. A certain disavowal of the hyperobjective dimension of garbage is involved in this attempt to master the 'garbage emergency'. This is the ideological infrastructure involved in the generation of hyperabjects. To elaborate this point, we draw on an aspect of the Lacanian theory of ideology developed by Slavoj Žižek (2008; also, Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000), which has been widely applied in the study of the 'fantasies' that shape the desire and relations of social agents (Glynos 2021) and their affective investment in policy initiatives (Griggs and Howarth 2023), including with regard to climate change and other crises of the Anthropocene (Pohl and Swyngedouw 2023; Swyngedouw 2022, 2023; Watt 2021).

By rearticulating garbage and local responses to the problem of excess garbage through hyperobjects, hyperabjects, and the Lacanian account of ideology, we hint at the limitations of the typical, expedient construal of the garbage emergency as simply another 'problem' that can be solved with techno-bureaucratic fixes. This limitation, in turn, shall be further elaborated in terms of 'slow violence'. As expounded by Rob Nixon (2011, 2), slow violence refers to 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.' Slow violence differs from the usual understanding of violence as 'an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility' (Nixon 2011, 2). In the attempt to 'fix' its garbage emergency, what emerges in Yogyakarta is a condition that engenders slow violence: the prolonged exposure to risks and vulnerabilities outside the purview of regulations, local government, and the media.

Methodology

To illustrate both the crises of waste management in the context of Indonesia and Yogyakarta, and the need for an ontological reframing through concepts such as the hyperobject, we draw on academic publications, government archives, and a range of publicly accessible materials, such as news media, reports, and policy documents, which offer a glimpse into the discursive construction of 'garbage emergency' within public and institutional narratives. In so doing, we do not engage in large-scale systematic textual or corpus analyses *per se* – our primary focus remains conceptual – but still follows the guiding theoretical premises of poststructuralist discourse theory as developed in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Glynos and Howarth (2007). Specifically, we fully adopt their *constructivist* thesis that the construction – or articulation – of meaning is constitutive of 'reality' as experienced by social agents (subjects), *as well as their materialist* thesis that every such construction of meaning is necessarily contingent, contestable, and

unstable, as it is unable to master the entirety of the 'real'. Although discourse analytical approaches are well established in environmental policy studies (e.g. Leipold et al. 2019), we are particularly inspired by recent applications of poststructuralist discourse theory interrogating the affective and ideological dimensions that underpin societal responses to the ecological crises of the Anthropocene (Pohl and Swyngedouw 2023; Swyngedouw 2022, 2023; Watt 2021).

While this article is oriented toward conceptual rearticulation based on analyses of Indonesian discourses on 'garbage emergency' and waste management, we nonetheless incorporate some field-based observations to anchor our discussion into the material realities of waste management. Between January and July 2025, multiple site visits were conducted at the Piyungan Landfill in Yogyakarta Province. These visits served two purposes: first, to document the landfill's physical and environmental conditions through on-site photographic evidence, following its official closure in May 2024; and second, to critically contrast these conditions with the representations of waste governance and crisis articulated in the literature and media accounts.

Indonesia's waste problem: an overview

The waste problem in Indonesia cannot be separated from its sizable population of 270 million people, economic growth, business activities, and high levels of consumption (Damanik et al. 2025). The latest data available as of 21 September 2025 shows that total waste produced annually in Indonesia has reached more than 35 million tons, where around 37.53% is unmanaged.[3] Moreover, in 2023, 22.17 million tons of waste was estimated to be spread across rivers, roads, and open land (D. Waluyo 2025). The waste management sector also contributes around 5% of the total greenhouse gas emissions (Gautam and Agrawal 2021), and Indonesia is the third-largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions in the world from the waste sector (Aprilia 2021). Indeed, open burning, which produces emissions of CO, CO2, SO, NO, PM10, and other atmospheric pollutants (Gutberlet and Baeder 2008) and is a significant contributor to the estimated 1 million deaths per year in lower-income countries from diseases related to mismanaged waste (Williams et al. 2019), remains a popular method of waste disposal in Indonesia. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), 48% of Indonesian households burn at least part of their household waste, compared to the global average of 14% (LR Foundation & Gallup, 2024).

The magnitude and complexity of Indonesia's waste management problem is perhaps epitomized by the catastrophe at West Java's Leuwigajah Landfill on 21 February 2005, when a 200-m-long and 60-m-high mountain of garbage collapsed onto a surrounding informal community and claimed the lives of more than 150 people (Javier 2025) – the second- worst disaster of such kind in terms of human casualties, after the 2000 Payatas Tragedy in the Philippines (Mahendra 2023). A number of government interventions have accordingly touched on landfill management. The Waste Management Act of 2008 (UU No. 18/2008) sought to improve public health and environmental quality and to make waste a resource (Article 4), while also stipulating the closure of open dumping landfills by the year 2014. The transition out of open dumping landfills was reiterated by Presidential Decree No. 81/2012, which specifies (in Article 22) acceptable final waste processing as follows: a) controlled landfill method; b) sanitary landfill method; and c) environmentally friendly technology. The intent to move away from open landfills remains, however, unrealized. From the field investigation conducted in 12 municipal solid-waste landfills in major cities in Indonesia by Munawar et al. (2018), none of the investigated landfills have met the requirements of the Waste Management Act. Even the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, which should supervise and guide local governments in waste management, has instead stated that permits for the construction of new landfills will continue to be issued until 2030 (Siregar 2023). In 2025, only around 39% of waste will have been managed, leaving the remaining 61% for unregulated dumping in rivers, roads, swamps, and under houses, among other places (Rosmalia 2025). Indonesia's target (outlined in Presidential Regulation No. 97 of 2017) of 30% reduction and 70% management of household waste by 2025 is therefore unlikely to be met.

The Indonesian government has also responded to the waste problem by encouraging a model of circular economy centred on 'waste banks', which allows people to sell sorted waste for subsequent value generation or industrial use. Although it has found some success in parts of the country, the waste bank initiative continues to face challenges, such as political instability, low enforcement of waste sorting rules, poor conditions of storage facilities that affect health, limited budget and technical handling of waste,

inconsistent recycling behaviour and unintegrated waste collection that ultimately leads to waste being disposed of in a commingled form, most of which ends up in landfills (Zahrah, Yu, and Liu 2024). The contribution of waste banks is less than 10% of the national recycling efforts (Budiyarto, Clarke, and Ross 2025). Only 9.14% of households in Indonesia consistently sort their waste, while 57.91% never sort waste (BPS 2021), with low-income households more likely to sort waste to be sold to waste banks than high-income households (Zakianis and Djaja 2017).

In March 2025, the National Waste Handling and Management Acceleration Task Force has been established by the national government under the Coordinating Ministry for Infrastructure and Regional Development (*Kementerian Koordinator Infrastruktur dan Pembangunan Kewilayahan*), to ensure that waste from the Integrated Waste Disposal Site (*Tempat Pengolahan Sampah Terpadu*, or TPST) to the Final Processing Site (*Tempat Pembuangan Akhir*, or TPA) can be destroyed, recycled, or used toward generating sustainable electrical energy (Laksono 2025). However, continued reliance on a landfill open dumping system to manage waste has tended to cause problems with excess storage capacity. Inappropriate waste sorting and collection can disrupt management flows, hinder material recycling, and lead to unsustainable practices, such as unregulated open burning and dumping (Mmereki, Baldwin, and Li 2016).

In several major cities in Indonesia, there have been cases where the closure of landfills due to over-capacity was followed by unregulated discarding of waste, risking serious heavy metal pollution of water, soil, and plant ecosystems (Wiedinmyer, Yokelson, and Gullett 2014). Waste problem in Indonesia's large cities implicates surrounding suburban areas, as they tend to become 'sacrifice zones' (Ipsen and McMillan Lequieu 2024) that serve as final disposal sites of waste from the cities, which often arrive with minimal processing. Waste management in large cities in Indonesia continues to rely significantly on the informal sector of waste management, such as scavengers and collectors (often from outside the city), for whom selling collected waste is their primary source of income (Kristanto, Kemala, and Nandhita 2022). Based on data from the Indonesian Scavenger Association (IPI), there are around 3.7 million scavengers registered in 25 provinces in Indonesia. When those who have not registered are accounted for, it is estimated that the total number of scavengers in Indonesia could reach around 5 million.[4] As an informal subdivision in the waste management system, these waste pickers contribute to managing and decreasing waste (Astuti, Syafrudin, and Susilowati 2024; Besiou, Georgiadis, and Van Wassenhove 2012; Chen and Gao 2021; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). However, the majority of them do not have adequate health insurance (Windi, Livingstone, and Whittaker 2023), raising concerns regarding their physical health (Zolnikov et al. 2021). The pattern of waste management sketched above is highly dependent on the availability of final storage sites (e.g. landfills) and harbours the risk of disruption due to overcapacity. That was precisely what transpired in the 'garbage emergency' in Yogyakarta.

Yogyakarta's 'garbage emergency'

Piyungan Landfill (TPA Piyungan) located southeast of Yogyakarta City in Bantul Regency (Figure 1), is the largest landfill in Yogyakarta Province. The landfill receives the bulk of waste from the province's urban centres, up to approximately 650 tons per day or around 44.67% of waste produced in the province (Pambudi 2025). The landfill's overcapacity and inevitable closure are regarded as the main factor of what has come to be called Yogyakarta's 'garbage emergency'. Having exceeded capacity since 2012, Piyungan Landfill was temporarily closed several times before 2023, with its overcapacity leading to an increase in the amount of unmanaged waste.[5] Its supposedly permanent closure on 1 May 2024 led to many locations in Yogyakarta City being littered with large amounts of garbage bags, which forced the provincial government to subsequently grant special privilege to Yogyakarta City to continue dumping its garbage at Piyungan Landfill. This privilege, legitimized by the regulations of the Yogyakarta Provincial Environmental Service, specifically allows Piyungan Landfill only to accommodate garbage from Yogyakarta City that originates from tourism and related economic activities (Nasihudin et al. 2025).

Poor waste management at Piyungan Landfill has been identified a cause of social conflict. Since the landfill overflowed and began negatively impacting nearby communities, protests by local residents, often involving blocking road access to the landfill, have increased in frequency (Astuti, Syafrudin, and Susilowati 2024). Its closure has also impacted Sleman and Bantul Regencies, which have also relied on landfill and where some locals with the capital and clout to do so have begun to run illegal waste

Figure 1. Kota Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta city) and TPA Piyungan (Piyungan landfill) within the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta province). Map data from OpenStreetMap. Available under the open database license (https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright).

disposal businesses (Nasihudin et al. 2025). While the nationwide initiative for 'waste banks' has been implemented in Yogyakarta, many such banks experience difficulties due to the small number of customers and lack of support, monetary or otherwise, limiting their contribution to waste management. The regional government proposed incineration (burning garbage in closed furnaces) as a possible solution to the garbage emergency. The construction of incinerator infrastructure has been extensively undertaken near Piyungan Landfill as well as other locations, such as the village of Bawuran in Pleret District, Bantul Regency,[6] occasionally in collaboration with private companies.[7] In terms of quantity, incinerators promise significant reduction of unprocessed waste, with a processing capacity of around 200 tons per day. The promotion of incinerators also led to the appearance of a number of small-scale incinerators, which are independently built by waste depots outside the Piyungan Landfill area. Despite the popularity of incineration, however, concerns have been raised regarding the safety of incinerators for health and environment (Tait et al. 2020). Moreover, our observations in the field suggest that some

Figure 2. Incinerators around Piyungan landfill, mid-2025. Source: The authors.

of these independent incinerators do not meet standards in their operation. For instance, during our site visit, we could see emissions of combustion smoke leaking out of the furnace and residues being scattered onto the surrounding open land. Our photographs (Figure 2) show incinerators in the Piyungan Landfill area both formal incinerators built by the government and also informal incinerators run by private. The government-owned incinerator appears to be equipped with sophisticated infrastructure with large capacity. However, by the time, our photographs were taken, the government-owned incinerator was not yet operational. Meanwhile, private incinerators, rudimentary and unstandardized, were in operation, burning waste sent from various locations in Yogyakarta. We were able to observe smoke billowing freely from those incinerators and plastic waste scattered around them.

The preceding overview of landfills and responses to excess waste in Yogyakarta evinces a tendency for *ad hoc* responses that fail to develop toward systematic, long term, sustainable solutions to the problem of waste management. While the lack of systematicity, as noted in our discussion of existing literature, is perhaps a general tendency in many regions of the Global South, the problem in Yogyakarta, and Indonesia more broadly, is exacerbated by the tendency to regard waste as a matter of technical administration rather than as a site of structural conflict, material inequality, and ecological consequence. Techno-bureaucratic fixes, such as incinerators and waste banks, are continually put forward as solutions, but they often function more as containment strategies than as genuine attempts to grapple with the ontological and political complexities of waste. Despite the widespread acknowledgment, for example, of the problem of plastic pollution in Indonesia and discussions of 'microplastic crisis' (IPEN 2024), little concerted effort has been made toward addressing them. As stated previously, we believe that part of the reason pertains to the conceptual limitation of the waste management discourse in Indonesia. Hence, by taking our distance from the domestic tendency to improvise 'solutions', we propose to regard failures of landfill and waste management in

Yogyakarta not as a symptom merely of the particular failures and insufficiencies of infrastructure and governance in Indonesia, but as touching on a deeply *ontological* dimension of crises in the Anthropocene that evinces the inadequacy of the prevailing infrastructures, both physical and ideological, which are mobilized to respond to them.

Hyperobject, hyperabject, and the illusion of governance

Morton's (2013) challenges the modernist assumption of human mastery over a world that is deemed to be a more-or-less stable background of human activity. As David Chandler (2018) has argued, the exploration of the loss of a stable world as background as the condition of the Anthropocene by Morton and others has profound implications for contemporary 'governing imaginaries'. We draw on Morton's notion of the hyperobject to articulate our contention that the emergence and responses to the garbage emergency point to a neglect, or more accurately, *disavowal*, of what could be called the 'hyperobjective' dimension of garbage. These results, we suggest, from a particular discursive or ideological construction of 'garbage emergency' and leads to an uneven distribution of the detrimental consequences of the problem of garbage – an outcome we shall discuss further in the final part of this paper by drawing on Frantzen and Bjering's notion of the hyperabject and Nixon's notion of slow violence.

Unlike more familiar medium-sized objects, hyperobjects are not locatable in spatio-temporal coordinates to which we are accustomed, thus lack the delineable, phenomenological 'thereness' by which we separate ourselves from typical objects of everyday experience. For instance, nuclear radiation, global warming, pollution, and the capitalist economic system – examples of hyperobjects Morton names – exhibit this quality of 'nonlocality' (Morton 2013, 54), in that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to determine either spatial or temporal points of beginning and end of these objects, even though they perennially are, in some sense, *before*, *around*, or *in* us. The usual means of dealing with objects that have become problematic or undesirable, namely separating out those objects and then eliminating them, are thus unavailable when dealing with hyperobjects. When we attempt to address, for example, global warming as a problem, we soon realize that it is connected to every aspect of our lives: politics, economics, and transportation infrastructure, as well as many of our basic daily activities. Global warming, then, cannot be separated so that it can be handled as simply one object among others. Like fluids that cannot be completely removed once spilled because they either seep into the surface or stick to the very tools we use for their removal, global warming is inseparably intertwined with every aspect of our life, including the very means – and our thought processes are not excepted from this 'viscous' (28) quality of hyperobjects – that we might mobilize to resolve it. Hence, Morton's (2013, 140) question: 'The problem goes beyond how to dispose of human-sized things, like the stuff that gets flushed down a toilet. What should we do about substances in whose inside we find ourselves?'

Reframing garbage as a hyperobject is useful for capturing its ontological *being* and highlighting Yogyakarta's garbage emergency as a problem that allows for no easy 'fix'. However, we wish to pay greater attention to the differential and uneven consequences of hyperobjects than Morton, who tends to position the generic 'humanity' as those whose existence is rendered precarious by hyperobjects. To extend the notion of hyperobjects toward the thought of differentiality and unevenness, we rely on Frantzen and Bjering's (2020) formulation of the hyperabject.

The notion of the hyperabject connects the hyperobject to literary theorist Julia Kristeva's (1982) account of the *abject*, which implicates the haunting presence of something that must be excluded (or excreted) for an interior (e.g. a self) to maintain its identity or idealized image. In Frantzen and Bjering's usage, the hyperabject denotes a 'planetary infrastructure of waste.' What defines the hyperabject is not only the extension but also the inertness and the clogging of economic and ecological circulations produced by this inertness' (Frantzen and Bjering 2020, 89). In line with Morton's post-anthropocentric object-oriented ontology and other new materialist thinkers (Bennett 2010; Latour 2014), Frantzen and Bjering accept the agentic property of matter and that the power of agency – which for those thinkers is no longer the prerogative solely of humans – is the outcome of the complex entanglement between humans and nonhumans as well as between nonhuman entities. Yet Frantzen and Bjering point out that matter can also undergo a loss of agency, or even enter a state marked by an absence of generative entanglements or 'vitality' that new materialists typically emphasize. The hyperabject, then, refers to the liminal moment at

which matter loses agentic power and (re)turns to inertness, the sole outcome of which can only be a kind of 'piling up' or 'clogging,' with the site of the clog sometimes being the human body itself. 'Having been discarded, junked, and excreted in the everlasting process of capitalism, the concrete instantiations of the hyperabject at some point return with a vengeance', write Frantzen and Bjering (2020, 89–90): 'Humans consume fish that have consumed the plastic that the humans themselves once discarded'.

The key feature that distinguishes the hyperabject from Morton's hyperobject – indeed, the feature that makes the hyperabject a necessary supplement when reframing Yogyakarta's garbage as a hyperobject – is that, whereas the latter foregrounds the precariousness of humanity in general in relation to things that have far exceeded its mastery (even though they may be partly anthropogenic, such as global warming), the former foregrounds the *differential* or *uneven* realization of hyperobjects and their consequences. Hence, 'humans' in the previously quoted sentence, who cause hyperabjects and suffer from them, do not compose a homogeneous whole. Frantzen and Bjering explain in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

> However global in scope, the hyperabject is always also local. But it is never democratic – whether we are talking about cause or effect. Within an ecological framework 'we' are precisely not in the same proverbial boat, nor is humankind to blame for global warming (this is why the Anthropocene is a problematic concept, in much the same way as the hyperobject is). Some people and nations and corporations bear most of the responsibility for creating and causing hyperabjects, and in terms of its effects, the hyperabject is differentially and undemocratically distributed along axes of class, gender, race, etc. It designates a dialectical relation between inclusion and exclusion – a precarious state of vulnerability and violence, even death, but a thoroughly uneven state where some populations are clearly much more exposed than others, especially in the Global South. In this sense, the hyperabject also pertains to the condition of being abject. (Frantzen and Bjering 2020, 101)

There are global and domestic infrastructures – in the sense of 'infrastructure' that goes beyond physical systems, such as roads and utilities, to encompass social infrastructures such as the capitalist economy, normative and cultural practices, and political and legal frameworks – that allow the hyperabjective instantiation of garbage differentially at particular sites in a particular manner. Taking this differentiality and unevenness into account is relevant when thinking about the waste problem in the Global South, not only because (as Frantzen and Bjering already point out) of the economic and power imbalance between the Global North and South but also because the detrimental consequences of garbage are never realized evenly across a given society. In the context of India, for example, state-led initiatives for garbage-free cities tend to disproportionately affect those located at the less visible margins of society (Sharma 2023). In the context of Indonesia, the designation of certain suburban areas as 'sacrifice zones' (Ipsen and McMillan Lequieu 2024) for the final site of garbage disposal also hints at the emergence of hyperabjects.

In the Indonesian situation, we find that the explanatory usefulness of the notion of hyperabject can be enhanced by considering in greater detail the role of ideological infrastructure in the creation of hyperabjects. Specifically, we draw on Slavoj Žižek's thesis that in ideology, 'inherent impossibility is changed into an external obstacle' (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000, 100). According to this view, the quintessentially ideological aspect of a given discourse – what some discourse analysts identify as its 'fantasmatic' dimension (Glynos and Howarth 2007) – consists, firstly, in turning an 'ontological' deadlock that is impossible to overcome into an 'ontic' problem that appears surpassable, and secondly, in offering an explanation for why it has not yet been overcome. We may detect these ideological operations, for example, in right-wing populist discourses, where subjects experiencing a profound dissatisfaction – a lack of fullness, of 'full enjoyment' (Stavrakakis 2007, 199) – become passionately invested in a discourse that explains their lack (e.g. 'our jobs have been stolen by the Chinese') and thereby adumbrate a possible solution to the overcoming of the lack (e.g. deporting immigrants and a trade war with China). The ideological character of these discourses consists not so much in the factual accuracy (or the lack thereof) of explanations they offer, but in how they redirect the desire of subjects toward a particular objective or state of affairs, the achievement of which comes to represent for the subjects the overcoming of lack or impossibility. Through such a 'positivization' of lack or impossibility, ideology provides a 'lens' through which a situation becomes 'readable' and contributes to the construction of a subjectively perceived and experienced 'reality' that affords to social actors, at least partially, a sense of control and directionality (Ostrowski 2022).

As we have already noted, a hyperobject is characterized by 'an incomprehensibility from which it is impossible to produce any sort of politics' (Frantzen and Bjering 2020, 104), such that confronting it results in a sense of 'political impotence' and 'epistemic cosmic horror' (Rueda 2022, 382). The approach to ideology

and discourse analysis we propose would suggest that because such incomprehensibility and impotence constitute an experience – a traumatic 'encounter with the real', as Lacanian theorists of ideology would put it (Stavrakakis 2007, 75) – that subjects (social actors) cannot tolerate indefinitely, garbage, which *qua* a hyperobject cannot finally be separated from us and be eliminated, would come to be construed by those subjects as a problem that is in principle overcomable.

Even though it is not the aim of this article to engage in a systematic analysis of a large set of textual data, we note that the most common discursive articulations of waste management in Indonesia, which trace the cause of 'garbage emergencies' in the country to infrastructural and bureaucratic shortcomings, appear to support the thesis. Apart from local government responses and domestic scholarly publications already mentioned in the preceding parts of this article, the Presidential Regulation (*Perpres*) No. 35 of 2018 states the aims of the country's waste management policy as follows: 'to significantly reduce the volume of waste for the sake of cleanliness and beauty of the city [*kebersihan dan keindahan kota*] and to make waste a resource' (Republik Indonesia 2018, 5).[8] The change of regime has not drastically altered the state's approach to waste management, as seen in the recent Presidential Regulation No. 109 of 2025, issued to address the 'national waste emergency' (Republik Indonesia 2025). It emphasized that 'waste is no longer merely an environmental burden, but rather a renewable energy resource that can be processed into electricity, biogas, biofuel, renewable fuel oil, and various other derivative products using environmentally friendly technologies' (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup Republik Indonesia 2025). By some in the waste management sector, the crisis in Yogyakarta has been described as an opportunity to shift the paradigm of waste management toward a 'new system based on technology and community participation'.[9] The focus on infrastructure, efficient bureaucracy, and new technology evinced by state and regional government policy-makers is also found in commentaries by non-state actors, such as the Yogyakarta branch of WALHI, Indonesia's largest environmental NGO.[10]

The predominant discourse of garbage emergency in Yogyakarta (and Indonesia more broadly) articulates challenges posed by waste as a temporary problem of more-than-usual, excess garbage that manifests on the streets and commercial and residential areas of the city (undermining the latter's 'cleanliness and beauty'). As such, it is a discourse that construes garbage as a problem that is localized and potentially solvable with the implementation of measures, such as better infrastructure, management, and bureaucracy. Such an articulation of the problem of garbage as a temporary emergency may succeed in restoring a sense of control over the crisis situation. Indeed, it might be argued that the local government is incentivized to articulate the garbage problem in this manner, since conceding the insolubility of the problem would jeopardize its authority and legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

The necessity of efforts to somehow address 'garbage emergency' by presenting it as an addressable problem cannot be dismissed. Nevertheless, we wish to point out that the condition for the possibility of such an articulation is the disavowal of the hyperobjective dimension of garbage that techno-bureaucratic measures the government promises to mobilize cannot address. This dimension is precisely the dimension of garbage that becomes hyperabject. Garbage *qua* hyperabject is thus the outcome of an ideological operation that parallels Julia Kristeva's (1982) account of the abject, which alludes to an impure or disturbing 'excess' excluded to constitute and maintain a 'clean and proper' body – with the fantasmatic ideal of corporeal integrity in Kristeva's account by with what might be called an 'illusion of governance', i.e. some sense of control over a problem confronting society that governments, NGOs, and individual citizens cannot do without. However, the hyperobjective dimension of garbage, which is excluded from the purview of 'governance' – often oriented toward rebounding in or after a situation characterized as a crisis or emergency (Demiroz 2017) – does not disappear but accumulates elsewhere. In the remainder of this article, we discuss Piyungan as the site of the concrete localization of the hyperabject, that is, as a site of 'slow violence' to whose emergence the ideological infrastructure we have outlined contributes.

Piyungan as a site of slow violence

Construing the problem of garbage as pertaining to a localizable phenomenological object – amassing piles of garbage on the streets of the city – does, of course, facilitate certain types of practical interventions. This gain in practicality is, however, counterbalanced by the hyperobjective dimension of garbage that falls outside the focus and scope of those interventions. Waste matter that is no longer visible because it lies

inertly underground or in the interiority of human bodies, for instance, ceases to constitute the object of intervention.

What follows is the *unevenness* of the consequences of garbage, i.e. *differences* in the ways in which this hyperobject affects different groups – precisely what Frantzen and Bjering's account of the hyperabject brings into focus. Although the restoration of clean streets in the city may represent for the local government the overcoming of the garbage emergency, the hyperobjective dimension of the garbage is not eliminated. Instead, garbage excluded from techno-bureaucratic interventions accumulates somewhere, a location outside the focus and scope of those interventions, becoming an instance of the hyperabject. We bring the notion of 'slow violence' to bear on our discussion of the garbage emergency in Yogyakarta to think about the consequences of disavowing the hyperobjective dimension of garbage.

Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of slow violence perfectly captures the drawn-out suffering that results from the persistent, 'viscous', dimension of garbage that remains beyond the purview of techno-bureaucratic management of garbage, which focuses on the removal of localized 'excess' garbage. In the case of Yogyakarta, garbage that falls outside the scope of techno-bureaucratic intervention accumulates at Piyungan, including in the organic matter of humans that inhabit the area. As we have explained in the previous section, construing the garbage emergency *as an emergency* exemplifies an ideological fantasy within which hyperabjection is turned into a problem solvable through more infrastructure (faster removal of trash, for instance). The garbage emergency breaches the threshold of 'eventfulness' so as to attract society's collective attention and instigate government response. Slow violence is the consequence of the garbage that 'depend[s] on forms of delay, deferral, attrition, and accumulation whose ordinariness *is* their violence' (Ahmann 2018, 144). Techno-bureaucratic interventions that the discourse of garbage emergency calls upon leave untouched the garbage that is *not* situated or visibly localized in populous centres of Yogyakarta City, such as the garbage seeps into the ground on which the inhabitants of Piyungan continue their livelihoods, and the garbage that has already entered their bloodstreams and cells, with potential long-term effects that may not even be recognized as originating from the said emergency.

Indeed, signs of long-term consequences of the kind that Nixon discusses in relation to slow violence – which encompasses 'climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes' (Nixon 2011, 2) – are already discernible at Piyungan. Developing and applying a disability-adjusted life year (DALY)-based estimate of the disease burden attributable to toxic waste sites in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Chatham-Stephens et al. (2013) estimated that in 2010, more than 8 million people were at risk of exposure to industrial pollutants in these three countries. It might be argued that Piyungan is one of the latest additions to that figure. According to a report from WALHI (2025), leachate originating from unmanaged organic waste is affecting rivers and groundwater in Piyungan. Residents living near the landfill are among the most impacted. They are unable to use their water for drinking and daily needs. Poor leachate management has resulted in high levels of chlorine in the local wells, and some residents have even suffered strokes.[11] It has also been observed that a significant number of Piyungan residents experiences digestive, dermatological, and respiratory disorders.[12] In permitting the neglect of these sufferings as the consequences of the problem of garbage, the techno-bureaucratic responses to the problem of garbage – indeed, their very focus on the 'emergency' of excess garbage – are partial, and complicit in the slow violence of which the inhabitants of Piyungan are likely to remain victims for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

The issue of waste management, particularly in Yogyakarta, but also more broadly across Indonesia, reveals the limitations of techno-bureaucratic and legal-formal approaches. Despite their tendency to frame the situation as an 'emergency', public and state actors appear unable to imagine novel, effective, or fair alternatives in their struggle against waste. Taking our cues from authors, such as Bell (2018) and Morton (2013), for whom waste attests to the profound entanglement between humans and seemingly inanimate material, we have suggested that concepts of the hyperobject and the hyperabject become especially salient in the context of waste management in Indonesia. Rearticulated through these concepts, the problem of

waste becomes not just a matter of failed infrastructure or mismanagement, but a material sign of the limits of modernist ideals of development and governance in the Anthropocene.

By reframing garbage as a hyperobject whose spatial and temporal distributions exceed what techno-bureaucratic solutions or fixes can countenance, we sought to highlight how the discursive articulation of 'garbage emergency' as resolvable or fixable through 'more of the same' (more infrastructure, better management, etc.) structurally neglects or disavows detrimental effects of waste that unfold beneath the purview of regulations, local government, and the media. 'Sacrificed' to serve as the final dumping site of urban waste, Piyungan, Yogyakarta province's largest landfill site, is not merely a technical endpoint in the waste management chain, but also the space where slow violence unfolds persistently and disproportionately. Garbage that silently accumulates, contributing to slow violence at Piyungan, is thus a sign of collective refusal or inability to confront the failures embedded in the modern developmental imagination, which promises continued growth and prosperity while systematically externalizing its ecological and social consequences. Although specific mechanisms that support or engender the disavowal of the hyperobjective dimension of disruptive things (e.g. waste) and the condition of hyperabjection (i.e. the differential realization of the detrimental consequences of hyperobjects) will differ across different situations, our analysis of Yogyakarta's garbage emergency affirms the long *durée* of the fundamental crises of the Anthropocene – whether they pertain to waste management, climate change, or any of the 'multiple crises the planet is now dealing with' (Escobar 2020, 5). This affirmation, in turn, is directly tied to the basic ethico-political implications of our approach.

It might seem that no practical alternative could ensue from a conceptual reframing of garbage as a hyperobject, if hyperobjects, as suggested by Morton's text, are spatiotemporally massive, unmanageable things for which no adequate politics can be produced. Indeed, our approach would problematize any politics beholden to the imaginary of order and harmony,[13] hence, oriented toward restoring – to repeat the 2018 Presidential Regulation on waste management, previously quoted in this article – the 'cleanliness and beauty of the city' (Republik Indonesia 2018, 5), devoid of disruptive hyperobjects. However, our approach does not imply inaction or resignation. For our deployment of the notion of hyperabject (via Frantzen and Bjering) already implicates a *minimal* politics. In our discussion of Yogyakarta's garbage emergency, we have emphasized that the detrimental effects of garbage are differentially or unevenly distributed. In this case, efforts to trace these differential realizations and to imagine their equitable, or even *democratic*, redistribution might be argued to ground a kind of politics that counterbalances the blind spots of techno-bureaucratic fixes. Such politics, which does not turn away from the hyperobjective dimension of things that rattle society, is one premised on the resolute acceptance that the 'emergency' will last a long time.

Notes

1. According to official statistics (Provinsi DI Yogyakarta 2025), the provincial population of the Special Region of Yogyakarta – comprising the city of Yogyakarta and four regencies (Bantul, Gunung Kidul, Kulon Progo, and Sleman) – in 2024 was approximately 3759.50 thousand people, with a population density of 1.18 thousand people/km^2. The city of Yogyakarta proper (Kota Yogyakarta), the most densely populated (11,562 people/km^2) of the five major administrative regions of the province, has a population of approximately 375.77 thousand within an area of 32 km^2.
2. Press release from the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism (Kemenpar RI), January 24, 2025. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://www.kemenpar.go.id/berita/siaran-pers-dukung-sektor-mice-dan-industri-pariwisata-yogyakarta-menpar-widiyanti-hadiri-peresmian-hotel-ramada-by-wyndham-dan-wyndham-garden-yogyakarta-conference-hotel-action-park.
3. Based on the information on waste management available from the Indonesian Ministry of Environment as of December 2025: https://sipsn.menlhk.go.id/sipsn/.
4. As reported by CNN Indonesia on November 20, 2019. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from https://www.cnnindonesia.com/teknologi/20191119124619-199-449650/ada-37-juta-pemulung-klhk-diminta-tak-larang-plastik.
5. News report by Universitas Gadjah Mada, August 20, 2023. Retrieved December 13, 2025 from https://ugm.ac.id/en/news/yogyakarta-in-waste-crisis-ugm-expert-why-the-outcry-now/.
6. Press release by the Yogyakarta Regional Government (Pemda DIY) on March 15, 2025. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://jogjaprov.go.id/berita/detail-berita/tpa-piyungan-dibuka-darurat-bantu-tuntaskan-persoalan-sampah-kota-yogyakarta.

7. Press release by the Yogyakarta Regional Government (Pemda DIY) on November 19, 2024. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://jogjaprov.go.id/berita/detail-berita/sultan-panggil-pemkot-yogyakarta-terkait-sidak-menteri-lh.
8. All Indonesian to English translation in this article is authors' own.
9. Quoted from an interview published in the news outlet *Intens Plus* on November 14, 2025: https://intensplus.com/2025/11/14/sorotan/jelang-penutupan-tpa-piyungan-2026-dprd-diy-soroti-darurat-sampah-di-yogyakarta/.
10. See, for example, the Oct 29, 2025, press release from WALHI Yogyakarta: https://walhijogja.or.id/rencana-pembangunan-psel-ancaman-perparah-degradasi-lingkungan-di-piyungan/.
11. WALHI Yogyakarta. (2024, September 13). *Pencemaran Air Lindi di Piyungan: Bukti World Water Forum Belum Jadi Solusi Pengelolaan Air – WALHI Yogyakarta*. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://walhijogja.or.id/project/pencemaran-air-lindi-di-piyungan-bukti-world-water-forum-belum-jadi-solusi-pengelolaan-air/.
12. Dewi, M. L. (2024, November 16). *Keretakan Metabolis di Piyungan: Lika-liku Darurat Sampah di Yogyakarta*. IndoPROGRESS. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from https://indoprogress.com/2024/11/lika-liku-darurat-sampah-di-yogyakarta/.
13. See Kim (2024) for a discussion of the ideological valence of such an imaginary in the Indonesian context.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

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