



RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA YAZISI

Liver Transplant News and Biases: A Ten-Year Review of Turkish Media

Karaciğer Nakli Haberleri ve Önyargılar: Türk Basınında On Yıllık Bir İnceleme

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Abstract:

Liver transplantation faces challenges arising from low public awareness, leading to shortages in organ donations and failure to meet patient needs. This study explores the dynamics between coverage within Turkey's traditional print media and the rates of liver transplantation, specifically analyzing news from the *Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, and *Sözcü* newspapers over ten years. This analysis aims to assess how print media coverage influences the public understanding and frequency of liver transplants, extending beyond the mere volume of articles and considering how these stories are presented. The study also evaluates the existence of a media bias in favor of living donor stories over those of deceased donors, which may shape public attitudes and behaviors regarding organ donation. This bias is evident in the limited coverage of deceased organ donors, highlighting a gap in public awareness and understanding. Based on an analysis of 280 articles, a significant link is shown between the extent of news coverage and the number of liver transplants, indicating the media's substantial impact on transplantation activities. Moreover, a correlation is identified between the limited coverage of deceased organ donors and the broader issue of limited public awareness in Turkey, reflecting the comparative lack of media focus on postmortem donations.

Keywords: Liver transplantation, health journalism, social awareness, organ donation, Turkish print press.

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Öz:

Karaciğer nakli, organ bağışlarında bir eksikliğe yol açan ve hasta ihtiyaçlarını karşılayamayan düşük kamu farkındalığından kaynaklanan zorluklarla karşı karşıyadır. Bu araştırma, Türkiye'deki yazılı basındaki medya kapsamı ile karaciğer nakli oranları arasındaki dinamikleri araştırmakta, özellikle Sabah, Hürriyet ve Sözcü gazetelerinde on yıllık bir süre boyunca yayınlanan haberleri analiz etmektedir. Çalışma, yazılı medya kapsamının kamuoyunun anlayışını ve karaciğer nakli sıklığını nasıl etkilediğini değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır ve bu haberlerin nasıl sunulduğunun bir analizini içerecek şekilde makalelerin hacminin ötesine geçmekte; medyanın, kadavra bağışçılara kıyasla canlı bağışçı hikâyelerini tercih edip etmediğini ve böylece organ bağışı konusunda kamuoyunun tutum ve davranışlarını şekillendirip şekillendirmediğini incelemektedir. Bu önyargı, kadavra organ bağışlarının sınırlı bir şekilde ele alınmasında yansıtılmakta ve kamuoyunun farkındalığı ve anlayışında bir boşluk olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. 280 makalenin analizi yoluyla, haber içeriklerinin kapsamı ile karaciğer nakli sayısı arasında önemli bir bağlantı bulunmuştur ve bu da basının nakil faaliyetleri üzerindeki önemli etkisini göstermektedir. Çalışmada, kadavra organ bağışlarının yetersiz kapsamı ile Türkiye'deki sınırlı kamu farkındalığının daha geniş sorunu arasında bir korelasyon tespit edilmiş; bu durum medyada kadavra bağışçılara nispeten az odaklanılmasıyla vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: : Karaciğer nakli, sağlık gazeteciliği, toplumsal farkındalık, organ bağışı, Türk basını.

Introduction

In Turkey, shortages of organ donations often necessitate liver transplants from living donors. This reflects broader issues in organ donation policies, as noted by Kasapoğlu et al. (2010). Terrault et al. (2023) emphasized that liver transplantation is a "life-saving treatment" for patients with cirrhosis and stage T2 hepatocellular carcinoma complications, but the demand for transplants far exceeds the supply. Van der Vliet et al. (1982) suggested strategies for routine organ procurement in general hospitals to address the persistent shortage of cadaveric donor organs. Given that liver transplantation is the sole treatment for end-stage liver failure (Başkıran et al., 2018), raising public awareness about deceased donor practices is essential for increasing the numbers of both living and deceased donors.

The media has an important role in shaping public opinion and awareness about organ donation. However, factors such as competing news agendas, editorial policies, and public concerns may be obstacles to the media in encouraging organ donation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the media confirmed its capacity for impactful health journalism, yet coverage of organ donation remains limited. Traditional and new media platforms must prioritize the coverage of liver transplantation and organ donation to influence public awareness and health behaviors effectively.

Health journalism focuses on disseminating information about medical advancements, health policies, and wellness practices to educate the public and influence health-related decision-making. The accurate and complete presentation of health news is critical (Keshvari et al., 2018). However, previous studies have revealed that organ donation and transplantation are insufficiently addressed by the media in Turkey. Based on their analysis of 2449 news stories and 1179 television programs on organ donation and transplantation in Turkey, Yavuz Çolak et al. (2010) concluded that the coverage was insufficient and often included negative perspectives. Similarly, Göbekli et al. (2019) emphasized the need for greater collaboration between health professionals and journalists to increase the frequency and quality of such content.

Given the limited coverage of liver transplantation by the media, it needs to be prioritized in the news to boost interest in organ donation. By adopting strategies aligned

with a positive discourse on organ transplantation, media organizations can play crucial roles in fostering public awareness and promoting behaviors that support public health. Studies addressing organ transplantation from diverse perspectives remain essential to shaping a more informed and health-conscious society. The present study accordingly explores the dynamics between media coverage within Turkey's traditional print media and the rates of liver transplantation over ten years to assess how print media coverage influences the public understanding and frequency of liver transplants.

Method

Liver transplantation is critical for patients with end-stage liver disease, with success rates highly dependent on the availability of organ donors. However, in Turkey, there is a concerning disparity between the number of patients requiring liver transplants and the number of available organ donations, particularly from deceased donors. This shortage is often attributed to insufficient social awareness, which has not yet been appropriately addressed by health policies or media coverage. In light of the potential influence of print media in shaping public opinion and behaviors, this study focuses on *Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, and *Sözcü* as the top three newspapers in Turkey in terms of circulation, aiming to investigate the role of Turkish newspapers in informing the public about liver transplantation and emphasizing organ donation, thereby possibly affecting transplantation rates. The following hypotheses guided the research:

The print media in Turkey disproportionately highlights living donor transplants over deceased donor transplants, which may reinforce public preferences and practices favoring living donations due to more extensive coverage (Hypothesis 1).

Fluctuations in the volume of news articles on liver transplantation, and particularly the decline in such articles in 2020, are associated with external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which may influence media reporting priorities and healthcare system capacities (Hypothesis 2).

Representations of liver transplantation in print media, which often feature personal stories involving donors and recipients, contribute to increased awareness and positive

perceptions of living organ donations among the Turkish public (Hypothesis 3).

Media representations of organ transplantation centers and their successes positively influence public opinion and increase the willingness to donate organs through both living and deceased donations (Hypothesis 4).

There is a significant correlation between the frequency of liver transplantation news articles in Turkish newspapers and the actual number of liver transplantations performed, suggesting that increased media attention may influence the rates of liver transplantation (Hypothesis 5).

Quantitative and qualitative content analyses were carried out in this study. Content analysis allows for the systematic interpretation of numerical data that are qualitatively evaluated (Bilgin, 2006). Berelson (1952: 18) described content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” It aims to reveal the essence and qualities of a studied phenomenon, shed light on important findings, or provide an understanding of the effect of a message on its target audience (Berelson, 1952: 15-17). For the content analyses carried out in this study, categories were established based on themes, as seen in the tables in the next section.

San Sungunay and Yağcı (2023) analyzed the portrayal of organ donation news in *Hürriyet* over 11 years (2011-2022), similar to this study. However, this study distinguishes itself by focusing on liver transplantation across three different newspapers from Turkey’s national press, selected for their different editorial policies and high circulation. The investigation was constrained to the selected newspapers (*Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, and *Sözcü*) and a timeframe of 10 years while assessing the print media’s engagement with liver transplant-related news. The archive of the National Library of Turkey was used to collect the relevant news articles for the period of 1 January 2013 through 31 December 2022. For this period, a total of 280 articles on liver transplantation were identified across the three newspapers: *Sabah* led with 112 articles, *Sözcü* followed with 86, and *Hürriyet* published the fewest with 82 articles.

Findings

As seen in Table 1, which presents the themes of news articles on liver transplantation published in the selected newspapers, the predominant media focus is on transplantation, while the least coverage is observed in the domain of projects.

Table 1. Themes of the news articles

Theme	<i>Sabah</i>		<i>Hürriyet</i>		<i>Sözcü</i>		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Transplantation	62	55.36	50	60.98	48	55.81	160	57.14
Treatment/Non-Transplantation	3	2.68	4	4.88	5	5.81	12	4.29
Organ Donation	14	12.50	8	9.76	10	11.63	32	11.43
Health Tourism	2	1.79	2	2.44	1	1.16	5	1.79
Projects	2	1.79	1	1.22	1	1.16	4	1.43
Other	29	25.89	17	20.73	21	24.42	67	23.93
Total	112	-	82	-	86	-	280	-

Table 2 presents the types of agents featured in the analyzed news articles. It was found that patients were the most frequently featured agents, while foreign nationals were represented the least. In the category of athletes, the

agents featured in the analyzed news articles were Naim Süleymanoğlu (most prominently), Şamil Sam, Rıdvan Dilmen, and Eric Abidal.

Table 2. Types of agents featured in the news articles

Agent type	<i>Sabah</i>		<i>Hürriyet</i>		<i>Sözcü</i>		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Institution	20	17.86	11	13.41	14	16.28	45	16.07
Donor	18	16.07	11	13.41	20	23.26	49	17.50
Patient	40	35.71	31	37.80	26	30.23	97	34.64
Foreign National	2	1.79	3	3.66	2	2.33	7	2.50
Doctor	9	8.04	5	6.10	13	15.12	27	9.64
Politician	2	1.79	2	2.44	2	2.33	6	2.14
Celebrity	5	4.46	8	9.76	2	2.33	14	5.00
Athlete	16	14.29	11	13.41	7	8.14	34	12.14
Total	112	-	82	-	86	-	280	-

Regarding the type of liver transplantation discussed in the news articles, a notable majority of the articles focused on organ transplantation from living donors (Table 3).

Table 3. Type of transplantation

Type of transplantation	Living donor		Deceased donor		Unspecified		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Sabah</i>	50	44.64	12	10.71	50	44.64	112	-
<i>Hürriyet</i>	39	47.56	5	6.10	38	46.34	82	-
<i>Sözcü</i>	45	52.33	5	5.81	36	41.86	86	-
Total	134	47.86	22	7.86	124	44.29	280	-

As seen in Table 4, the newspapers exhibited consistent and appropriate approaches within the framework of deontological ethics. The determining factor here is health journalism.

Table 4. News articles' approaches to liver transplantation

Sentiment	<i>Sabah</i>		<i>Hürriyet</i>		<i>Sözcü</i>		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Positive	93	83.04	59	71.95	66	76.74	218	77.86
Negative	13	11.61	11	13.41	7	8.14	31	11.07
Neutral	6	5.36	12	14.63	13	15.12	31	11.07
Total	112	-	82	-	86	-	280	-

Among the analyzed years, 2019 had the highest frequency of news articles being published, and 2015 had the lowest frequency (Table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of number of news articles on liver transplantation per newspaper and liver transplantation rates annually

Publication year	<i>Sabah</i>		<i>Hürriyet</i>		<i>Sözcü</i>		Total		Liver donation rate (living)*	Liver donation rate (deceased)*	Annual liver transplantations*
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	%	%	
2013	15	13.39	2	2.44	7	8.14	24	12.8	12.8	3.8	16.7
2014	10	8.93	3	3.66	6	6.98	19	11.8	11.8	4.2	16.0
2015	10	8.93	3	3.66	4	4.65	17	11.1	11.1	4.4	15.5
2016	14	12.50	4	4.88	9	10.47	27	12.6	12.6	4.9	17.5
2017	17	15.18	10	12.20	9	10.47	36	13.5	13.5	4.4	17.9
2018	11	9.82	14	17.07	8	9.30	33	14	14	5.4	19.4
2019	16	14.29	14	17.07	8	9.30	38	16.2	16.2	5.2	21.4
2020	3	2.68	8	9.76	9	10.47	20	14.1	14.1	1.5	15.6
2021	7	6.25	13	15.85	13	15.12	33	16.3	16.3	1.7	18.0
2022	9	8.04	11	13.41	13	15.12	33	17.1	17.1	1.7	18.8
Total	112	-	82	-	86	-	280	-	13.95	3.72	17.68
									$r=0.74$	$r_s=0.327$	$r=0.90$
									$p=0.015$	$p=0.356$	$p<0.001$

Source: GODT (n.d.); data retrieved 14 February 2024 from <https://www.transplant-observatory.org/summary>

*: Per million people

r : Pearson correlation coefficient (correlation with annual total news articles)

r_s : Spearman rank correlation coefficient (correlation with annual total news articles)

There is a statistically significant correlation between the total annual number of news articles and the total annual number of liver transplants. Figure 1 depicts the mutual trend of increasing liver transplantation news coverage and increasing transplantation procedures in the period from 2013 to 2022. Notably, however, while both trends show an upward trajectory, they do not precisely mirror each other. This divergence suggests that, although media coverage and actual transplantation rates may be connected, they are not strictly synchronized. External factors not detailed in the graph likely influence these variations.

The convergence of these trends indicates a possible correlation between media coverage and liver transplantation rates, but it is important to consider the diversity of the other factors influencing transplant numbers, including changes in medical protocols or healthcare policies, which are beyond the scope of the data obtained in the present study. The notable decrease in news

articles on liver transplantation in 2020 may be assumed to reflect the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shifted media focus and also constrained healthcare systems, with the latter effect leading to a temporary decline in transplantation activities. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic exerted a wide variety of negative effects, ranging from material shortages and problems with physical space capacity for health services to increased rates of problematic internet usage (Koca and Eryücel, 2024: 347). Some hospitals were forced to use structures such as stadiums, dormitories, and hostels as temporary pandemic hospitals (Yagma et al., 2020). Therefore, the impact of COVID-19 on the number of transplants should be evaluated within the context of these diverse effects. This finding also underscores how externalities can disrupt established trends. While there is a broad correlation between the frequency of transplantation-related news and the number of procedures performed, these trends are both influenced by a complex interplay of factors that can cause periodic asynchrony.

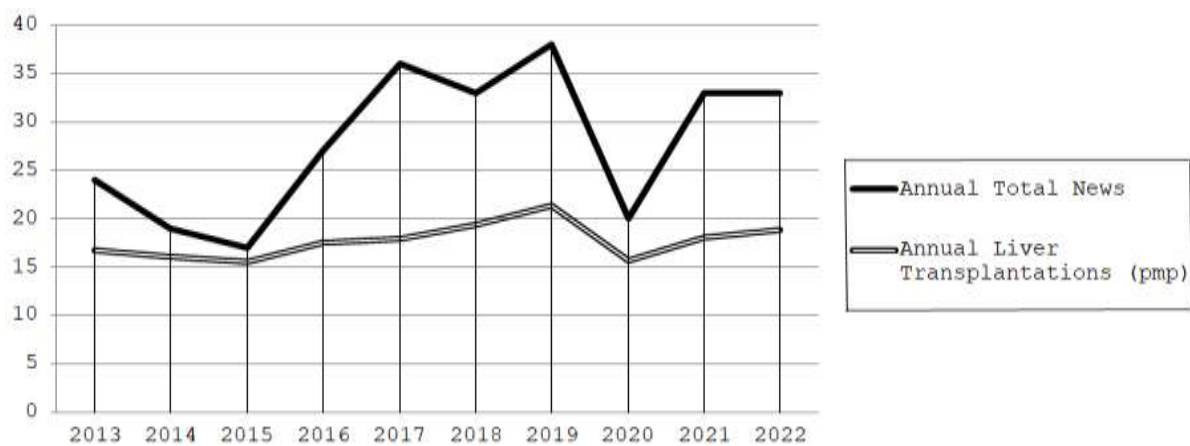


Figure 1. Line graph comparing the frequency of news articles on liver transplantation (solid black line) and actual liver transplantations performed per million population (pmp) (white line with black borders) from 2013 to 2022.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on media influence in health communication, particularly concerning organ donation and liver transplantation. Previous research has emphasized the powerful role of media in shaping public awareness, attitudes, and behaviors related to organ donation (Pruinelli & Luce Kruse, 2012; González et al., 2024). While existing literature has explored various aspects of organ donation and transplantation in media contexts, no prior studies have collectively addressed the five interrelated dynamics investigated in this study—namely, the preferential emphasis on living donors, the pandemic-induced shifts in coverage, the role of personal narratives, the portrayal of transplant centers, and the correlation between media attention and transplantation rates—within the context of Turkish print media. This study has described the modest engagement of the Turkish national press with liver transplantation over the past decade, with limited agenda-setting for this topic. However, the existence of news coverage of organ donation and transplantation, often framed positively, indicates some level of ongoing public attention. The results regarding the hypotheses put forward in the study are remarkable.

It has been observed that living donor transplants are seen more in news texts. Hypothesis 1 is also related to this observation. Hypothesis 1 is supported by the finding that living donor transplants are emphasized over deceased donor transplants in news articles, as shown in Table 3. This trend, driven by the emotionally compelling narratives often associated with living donors, could shape public preferences. However, the predominance of such stories might also unintentionally undermine awareness of postmortem donation transplants, which are essential for addressing organ shortages. Furthermore, media portrayals frequently frame liver donors as close relatives, reinforcing the misconception that liver donation is limited to family members. While relatives up to the fourth degree can donate without ethical approval, the process also allows non-relatives to donate with committee consent. This inclusive framework necessitates public education on liver donation criteria to expand awareness beyond familial ties.

One of the results obtained in the study is that news on liver transplantation was quantitatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Hypothesis 2 is validated by the observed fluctuations in liver transplantation news coverage, and particularly the

significant decline in 2020, attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, media priorities shifted and healthcare systems faced capacity challenges, demonstrating how external factors can influence the focus and volume of health-related news.

The tone of the written press's news language regarding organ donation is also important. This tone should be positive, conscious, and sensitive. Hypothesis 3 is corroborated by the prominence of personal narratives involving donors and recipients, as outlined in Table 2. Positive news coverage, accounting for 77.86% (Table 4) of all analyzed articles, further illustrates the influence of the media in fostering a supportive discourse regarding organ donation. By centering human stories, newspapers enhance public understanding and empathy, encouraging a more informed and engaged community to participate in organ donation.

By highlighting "success stories" regarding organ transplantation, the media can positively encourage the public's perspective and approach towards organ transplantation. Hypothesis 4 is confirmed by portrayals of transplantation centers and their achievements, which positively influence public opinion and willingness to donate organs. Media coverage that highlights medical advancements and successes builds trust and demystifies the transplantation process, encouraging broader participation. This representation not only showcases progress in the field but also makes organ donation more relatable and accessible, contributing to increased donation rates.

By publishing more liver transplantation news, the media may draw public attention to this context. Thus, Hypothesis 5 can be evaluated about this discussion. Hypothesis 5 is supported by the correlation between the volume of liver transplantation news and the actual number of transplants, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 1. The media's coverage extends beyond reflecting healthcare practices to potentially influencing transplantation outcomes. However, diverse factors, including medical advancements and healthcare policies, also contribute to the transplantation rate, and these factors were not explored in the present study. These external influences underscore the complex dynamics of healthcare practices and media coverage.

Previous studies that highlight similar findings may support the relevant hypotheses. However, the existence of studies with differing results is also noteworthy. For instance, Kıraklı et al. (2011) found in their study that individuals primarily obtained their knowledge about organ donation from the media. On the other hand, Dumanlı et al. (2019), in a study conducted with medical students, concluded that only 30% of participants reported acquiring their knowledge about organ donation from sources such as family physicians, the internet, close relatives or friends, and the media; the remaining 70% stated that they gained this information during their medical education. Similarly, a study examining medical students' perspectives on organ donation and transplantation observed a common trend toward "media promotions" as a more effective means of encouraging donation and increasing individual awareness (Toru & Ayada, 2016). In another study conducted with university students, Balçık et al. (2019) found that most participants believed transplantation and donation to be significant issues that should be emphasized and supported by the

media. Likewise, Koçak et al. (2010) emphasized the need for programs aimed at raising public awareness through the media to increase organ donation rates.

Cheung and Wolbring (2015), in their analysis of how science and technology research related to organ transplantation and donation was covered in Canadian newspapers (The Globe and Mail, National Post), concluded that many scientific and technological developments found in the 'academic' and 'grey' literature received little to no media attention. Another noteworthy finding was the limited focus on the social and ethical issues previously raised in the literature concerning these developments.

In recent years, studies focusing on the use of social media to promote organ transplantation have gained attention. Like traditional media, social media can be highly ergonomic in terms of raising awareness and creating consciousness. Social marketing campaigns regarding organ donation can also increase the public's potential to donate (Harrison et al., 2008; Henderson, 2017; Basu et al., 2021). At this point, it is also important to note that technological advancements have extended the preservation time of organs (Symeou et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the significant impact of print media coverage on public awareness and perceptions regarding liver transplantation in Turkey. The analysis affirmed the media's pivotal role in portraying living donor transplants, a practice that, while crucial, should be balanced with increased emphasis on the necessity of deceased donor transplants. The nuanced portrayal of organ donation stories, including news about the successes of transplantation centers, contributes positively to public attitudes and behaviors regarding organ donation. However, the media's potential to influence organ donation rates and transplantation practices brings with it the responsibility of addressing and rectifying public misconceptions, particularly regarding the eligibility and processes for both living and deceased organ donation.

Building on these fundamental points, this study has revealed the need for continuous and adaptable health journalism that can effectively respond to and reflect shifting healthcare landscapes, such as those experienced during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The media plays a crucial role in health education and awareness, and its capacity to influence public health behaviors and policies should be leveraged responsibly and effectively to address the ongoing challenges in organ donation and transplantation. The findings of this study call for collaborative efforts among healthcare professionals, policymakers, and media practitioners to foster an informed and supportive public environment that encourages organ donation. Such an approach is essential for addressing persistent organ shortages and enhancing the life-saving potential of transplantation programs, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes for those in need.

While this research focused on traditional print media, an important future direction involves the exploration of digital platforms and social media. As noted by Henderson et al. (2019) and Jiang et al. (2019), the rising use of social media by transplant professionals provides novel avenues for tailored and timely health information delivery.

Integrating traditional and digital strategies could enhance the reach and effectiveness of public health messaging.

In addition to media representation, evolving transplantation techniques also warrant attention in both public discourse and research. The widespread use of swap transplants as of 2023, also known as liver paired exchange, was not addressed in the news stories analyzed in this study due to the selected timeframe, however, it constitutes a crucial area for future investigation. This method allows for the possibility of increasing the number of liver transplantations through liver transplants involving multidirectional “swaps,” particularly in cases where donors are incompatible with their relatives due to blood type or graft volume incompatibility between the donor and recipient (Yilmaz et al., 2023). Coverage of such procedures in the media may further enhance public awareness and support for organ donation initiatives.

In conclusion, this study underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping public perceptions of liver transplantation in Turkey. The media’s emphasis on emotionally resonant and positively framed stories contributes to a favorable environment for organ donation. However, for this influence to translate into sustainable behavioral change, it must be coupled with accurate, inclusive, and diversified content that addresses public misconceptions and highlights all forms of donation. A collaborative effort between healthcare professionals,

journalists, and policymakers is essential to create a robust, informed public discourse that supports national transplantation goals and addresses the ongoing organ shortage.

Declarations

Ethics Committee Approval

This study did not require ethics committee approval.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

Financing

Not applicable.

Authors’ Contributions

CY contributed to the conceptualization. CY, AF, and Vİ writing of the method, data collection, analysis, and interpreted data contributed to the conceptualization of the research, analysis of data, translations, editing, and proofreading of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article.

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