



REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

Dating Apps and Cyber Harassment: A Review Article

Flört Uygulamaları ve Siber Taciz: Bir Derleme Makalesi

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Abstract:

The internet and technological advancements have become an integral part of modern life, transforming various aspects of individuals' daily routines and social interactions. Digitalization provides significant conveniences in fields such as education, art, politics, and entertainment, offering new opportunities for accessing information and facilitating communication. This transformation is also evident in human relationships, reshaping the ways in which romantic connections are formed. Today, social media platforms and dating applications offer alternative spaces for meeting new people, particularly for individuals with busy work schedules, limited social circles, or insufficient time to engage in traditional forms of dating. Online dating applications provide users with several advantages, including saving time, enabling communication independent of physical location, and offering access to a broad pool of potential partners. In this sense, they introduce a new dimension to modern romantic practices and facilitate the transition of flirtation experiences into digital environments. However, alongside these conveniences, such platforms also carry certain risks, most notably cyber harassment. Factors such as anonymity, lack of regulation, and the ambiguous boundaries of digital spaces may lead to negative experiences, particularly for women, regarding safety and privacy. This article aims to examine the effects of dating applications on their users, exploring both the opportunities they provide and the risks they entail, and to evaluate how these platforms transform individuals' romantic relationship-building habits.

Keywords: Romantic relationship, Dating apps, Cyber harassment.

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Öz:

İnternet ve teknolojik gelişmeler, modern yaşamın temel unsurları hâline gelmiş ve bireylerin günlük alışkanlıklarından sosyal ilişkilerine kadar pek çok alanı dönüştürmüştür. Dijitalleşme; eğitim, sanat, politika ve eğlence gibi geniş bir yelpazede çeşitli kolaylıklar sunarak bireylere hem bilgiye erişim hem de iletişim açısından önemli avantajlar sağlamaktadır. Bu hızlı dönüşüm, insan ilişkilerinde de etkisini göstermekte ve özellikle romantik ilişkilerin kurulma biçimlerini yeniden şekillendirmektedir. Günümüzde sosyal medya platformları ve flört uygulamaları, yoğun iş temposu, sosyal çevre sınırlılığı ya da geleneksel tanışma yöntemlerine zaman ayıramama gibi nedenlerle bireyler için alternatif tanışma alanları oluşturmuştur. Çevrimiçi flört uygulamaları, kullanıcılarına zamandan tasarruf etme, mekândan bağımsız iletişim kurabilme ve geniş bir kullanıcı kitlesine erişme gibi çeşitli olanaklar sunarak modern flörtleşme pratiklerine yeni bir boyut kazandırmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, bu platformların sunduğu kolaylıkların yanında siber taciz, kişisel verilerin kötüye kullanımı ve mahremiyet ihlalleri gibi önemli riskleri de barındırdığı bilinmektedir. Özellikle anonimlik ve denetim mekanizmalarının yetersizliği, kullanıcıların olumsuz deneyimler yaşamasına yol açabilmektedir. Bu makalede, flört uygulamalarının kullanıcı deneyimleri üzerindeki etkileri, sağladığı fırsatlar ve beraberinde getirdiği riskler ele alınarak bu platformların romantik ilişki kurma pratiklerini nasıl dönüştürdüğü değerlendirilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Romantik ilişki, Flört uygulamaları, Siber taciz.

Introduction

With technological developments, internet usage has been steadily rising (Özbay, 2017). Internet use spreads across all areas of people's lives, facilitating personal development and making life easier. As a result, internet usage has become a part of human life. It is possible to mention the presence of technology and the internet in many fields, such as social life, education, entertainment, and politics. According to TÜİK's Household Information Technologies Usage Survey, the rate of households with internet access from home reached 95.5% in 2023 (TÜİK, 2024). This research shows that internet use and access are common in most homes in Turkey.

The development of technology has brought about differences and new arrangements in individuals' lives, work environments, and social settings (Göger, 2021). With all these arrangements, a new world composed of digital life and its effects is emerging within human life. As the digital environment evolves, people's communication practices also change (İpek, 2020). The integration of social media into human life and the use of dating apps to establish new relationships enable individuals to connect with many people they could not in the real world (Avcı, 2015).

Digitalization offers individuals new social networks, and their expectations are changing (İpek, 2020). Due to heavy workloads, insufficient time for socializing, and the inability to create environments, people have formed new social spaces through digitalization. Chatting, flirting, and forming relationships have moved online, leading to the use of social media and dating apps. Flirting is the act of establishing a relationship and an emotional connection with someone of the opposite sex. This relationship model, which previously took place in social environments before digitalization, has expanded to online platforms with the development of the internet. As a result, individuals can access many options simultaneously and choose (Tapan, 2019).

Although the positive contributions of technology use are acknowledged, its unmindful, uncontrolled, and unlimited use also reveals negative effects (Barındık, 2021). Anonymous access to social media and applications, the inability to identify individuals during attacks, and the potential for multiple harms at once can lead to violations of personal privacy and security issues (Alicı, 2023). The

damages occurring in the digital world have given rise to a new form of violence. Hostile behaviors that happen in the digital environment and are repeatable are defined as cyberbullying (Willard, 2005). Although this concept is often associated with children and adolescents, it is also observed that adults are subjected to violence in the digital environment. This type of violence is defined as cyber harassment, which involves repeatedly disturbing a chosen individual with aggressive and hurtful messages (Baştürk & Sayımer, 2017).

Digitalization makes human life easier, but it also creates an environment conducive to the easy application of digital violence. Being able to reach many people, having easy access to personal information, and using the internet anonymously can lead to online harassment (Cöbek, 2022). At the same time, humans are social beings and act in accordance with their social needs. In a changing world, individuals develop their self-identity and relationship skills in social environments they have yet to discover. To facilitate this, they increasingly use dating apps today. These applications, referred to as 'Online Dating,' are called 'flirt apps' or 'online flirt applications' in Turkish.

This research will discuss interpersonal relationship models, the concept of flirting, and its applications in the literature. The motivations, psychological effects, and outcomes of individuals' use of flirtation apps will be examined. Additionally, the definition of cyberbullying, its epidemiology, risk factors, and its place in the literature will be addressed.

Method

This review aims to systematically examine the literature on dating applications and their psychosocial effects on individuals. In this context, searches were conducted in the Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar databases using the keywords "dating applications," "online dating," "cyber harassment," "cyber violence," "gender-based violence," and "psychological effects." Quantitative and qualitative studies published between 2015 and 2025, peer-reviewed journal articles, and studies conducted with adult samples were included in the review. Publications in Turkish and English were evaluated; conference abstracts, theses, and studies for which full texts were not accessible were excluded. The selected

studies were analyzed with respect to purpose, methods, sample characteristics, and main findings, and classified under thematic headings.

Romantic Relationships and Dating

Humans are social beings who form relationships and seek closeness. Closeness involves effects on individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and it is the continuation of long-term relationships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2012). When it comes to closeness and socialization, there are differences among cultures, and among theorists examining these concepts, various meanings emerge. Freud discusses love and relationships as sexuality and its elevation, while Harlow and Fromm researched bonding and attachment (Atak and Taştan, 2012). According to psychoanalytic theorist Kernberg, love and flirting are defined as the stimulation of love and sexual pleasure towards another person and their transformation into energy (Kernberg, 1995). Bowlby approaches relationships from an attachment perspective. According to Bowlby, attachment begins with the relationships formed with caregivers during infancy and extends to relationships with individuals around the person, continuing into adulthood (Gürçam, 2017).

In this context, it is observed that an individual has been a social being since infancy. King and Christensen (1983) note that for a romantic relationship to begin, individuals must progress through various stages. These stages include interaction between individuals, considering each other as partners, mutual interest, and thoughts about the future (King and Christensen, 1983). In romantic relationships, the initial stage is called the dating phase. The Turkish Language Association defines dating as 'establishing a close relationship with someone of the opposite sex, being emotionally interested' (TDK, 2022). Dating is seen as the beginning of love, an instinctive desire and recognition of the other gender (Yılmazçoban, 2008).

Individuals who need a social environment to engage in flirtatious behaviors find it difficult to do so easily under today's intense living conditions. As a result, this desire has also shifted to the virtual realm with the development of the internet. When a person wants to socialize, get to know someone in a relationship, or engage in sexual sharing, they prefer dating apps. These preferences are rapidly evolving and progressing as time and technology change.

Online Dating Application History

21. In the 21st century, with the development of technology, people have started establishing their relationships in virtual environments and have brought communication networks to new social platforms (Pala, 2015). Today, due to long work hours, the decline in social environments for socializing, and the lack of opportunities to meet new people, new socialization areas have become preferred (Çakır and Topçu, 2005). In the early 2000s, differences began to emerge in how individuals engage in romantic relationships. These differences shifted from traditional forms to shorter-term relationships, non-committal encounters, and sexual relationships (Timmermans and Courtois, 2018). Monto and Carey (2014), in their research, found that nowadays, young people and adults do not emotionally progress in their romantic relationships; they spend more time together primarily for sexual encounters. Changes in individuals' social lives, advances in technology, and shifts in people's

perspectives on relationships have also altered dating practices.

In 1995, the website 'Match.com' was launched to facilitate relationships and marriages (Kılınç, 2022). For a long time, flirting continued on websites, but as mobile technology advanced, it moved to mobile applications. The 'Zoosk' app started to enter people's lives (Jung et al., 2019). Subsequently, in 2012, the 'Tinder' app was launched, allowing users to match based on photos (Curry, 2022). In the following years, apps diversified and began to develop internally. Dating apps, which are thought to be used mostly in Western societies, are also widely used in Turkey. In the early 2000s, Turkey began using the first online dating website, 'Siberalem.' Later, with the emergence of various websites, Tinder also started to gain popularity in 2012 (Tanrıöver & Sunam, 2017). Among the most used apps in Turkey are Tinder, followed by OkCupid, Happn, Bumble, and Badoo (Cöbek & Ergin, 2021).

Although using dating apps is considered taboo in Turkey, their use has been steadily increasing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The social life, which has been declining due to the pandemic, has limited individuals' opportunities to flirt and socialize. As a result, people have started to use dating apps more frequently to fulfill their flirting needs. A study also indicated that the number of dating app users increased by 17% in January 2022 compared to January 2019 (Sensor Tower, 2022). Worldwide, the number of users reached 75 million in 2022 (Curry, 2022).

Online Dating Apps

Online dating applications are used as a tool for individuals to express themselves and comfortably initiate romantic relationships. Tinder, launched in 2012, was established to facilitate encounters among people and provide access to a broad network of individuals (MacKee, 2016). Its swipe feature aims to make usage easier and to enable people to meet others in a fun way, not just for dating, sex, or casual encounters (MacKee, 2016). The Tinder app generally matches users based on their location and offers free registration (Aydoğan, 2020).

Although the Happn app was created in France in 2014, it gained popularity many years later (Ma, Sun, Naaman, 2017). In the Happn app, in addition to the location feature, there is also a feature that shows people who have been in the same environment within 250 meters (Veel and Thylstrup, 2018). This increases the matching rate with people in the same environment and helps find individuals with shared interests.

The OkCupid app became available globally in 2014 (Cöbek, 2023). Unlike other apps, it offers a wide range of survey questions, including photo uploads and personal information (Cöbek, 2023). This way, individuals will have more information and will not judge others solely by their photos.

The Bumble app was created in 2014 as an application aimed at women (Alex, 2024). The most fundamental feature that sets this app apart from others is that women can send the first message in a match. With this app, which is based on female dominance, women's safety within the platform has been ensured.

When applications are examined, it is evident that they are fundamentally location-oriented and share similar

features. In each application, the goal is for the user to use it comfortably; although different features are added, they are established to facilitate flirting.

Motivations for Using Online Dating Apps

Motivation refers to the internal and external factors that drive individuals' behaviors (Ilgar, 2004). Internal motivation involves a sense of internal satisfaction or passion, while external motivation is influenced by factors such as receiving rewards or compliments from others (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In using online dating apps, individuals have various motivations. A 2015 study found that 44% of participants used Tinder to boost self-confidence and 22.2% to establish short-term relationships (Kılınç, 2022).

To measure individuals' motivations for using dating apps, Katz and colleagues (1974) developed the 'Uses and Gratifications Theory' (Kılınç, 2022). The theory is based on the idea that people have different needs due to their social structures, and for this reason, they create various communication channels (Ürkmez, 2021). According to this theory, individuals consciously use these channels to satisfy their needs and pursue different pleasures (Lull, 2001).

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, with biological needs at the base (McQuail and Windahl, 2010). The topmost layer includes psychological needs, which are the levels of pleasure they seek. According to Maslow, one cannot move to the next category without fulfilling the most basic drives. Thus, when a person meets their fundamental needs, they tend to satisfy their psychological needs, such as sexuality and social needs, and are motivated to use dating apps for socialization purposes (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014).

It has been observed that there are gender differences among individuals who use dating apps with the motivation of sexuality (Hamarat, 2023). Mostly, men prefer dating apps for sexual purposes, while women use them with motivations such as love and long-term relationships (Buss and Schmitt, 1993). Although the research generally suggests that men use these apps for sex, it has also been seen that women use Tinder and other apps for one-night stands as well (Deniz, 2020).

Another source of motivation stems from the need to socialize. Humans are social beings, and they prefer to use dating apps to meet new people, make friends, or flirt (Hart, 2015; Park et al., 2009). The apps chosen to fulfill psychological needs make individuals feel good, facilitate socialization, and boost their self-confidence (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). A 2016 study found that when using dating apps, people are motivated by feelings of being liked, the excitement triggered by the experience, and increased self-confidence (Sumter et al., 2016).

At the same time, the fact that dating apps are currently a popular communication tool also motivates users to use them. Being able to reach a wide audience through a single app, along with the excitement and curiosity it generates, is also included. The anonymity of users, the ability to evaluate others without face-to-face communication, and the creation of a free environment are also sources of motivation (Quian and Scott, 2007). The presence of these features particularly facilitates the dating environment for avoidant, anxious, and introverted individuals (Amichai Hamburger, Wainappel & Fox, 2002).

Risks of Online Dating Apps

Popular dating apps also pose risk factors. While they can promote psychological well-being, users are sometimes exposed to psychological and physical risks. A study conducted in 2020 indicated that 15% of individuals who underwent forensic examinations due to sexual assault had been subjected to violence by someone they met through online dating apps (Rowse, Bolt, and Gaya, 2020). In another study involving North Americans, it was found that 35% of users received sexually explicit messages, and 37% experienced repeated unwanted physical contact (Anderson, Vogels, and Turner, 2020). Although similar types of violence occur in face-to-face relationships, the anonymity and broad reach of dating apps hinder the prevention of such violence (Pooley & Boxall, 2020).

Psychological Effects of Online Dating Applications

Dating applications not only have physical and sexual effects but also impact users psychologically. The widespread reach of online dating apps, along with risks such as individuals engaging in sex without protection, the spread of personal information on the internet, stalking, and cyber harassment, can also lead to psychological manipulation, ghosting, breadcrumbing, and other psychological behaviors that harm individuals (Navarro et al., 2020). Studies have shown that women are more affected than men (Amar & Gennaro, 2005). When individuals are subjected to violence by their partners, there is an increase in psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety (Beydoun et al., 2012).

In a study conducted by Navarro and colleagues (2020), it was stated that users of dating apps experience dissatisfaction with their lives due to psychological violence, feeling lonely and helpless (Kılınç, 2022). Another study also found that as a result of psychological manipulation, individuals develop serious mental health issues such as dissociative disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (Akiş & Öztürk, 2021). This manipulation method is described as a form of emotional abuse inflicted on the individual's selfhood, distorting their self-perception and reality (Sweet, 2019).

There are both positive and negative effects on the lives of people who use dating apps. A study indicated that the positive aspects of using dating apps include a lower likelihood of rejection during face-to-face meetings and at the beginning of flirting within the app itself (Hanvey, 2010). The availability of a wide pool of potential matches makes it easier and more comfortable for users to find partners, encouraging usage (Alexopoulos, Timmermans, McNallie, 2020). The fact that individuals can participate anonymously in online dating apps creates a sense of comfort among users, and being able to see personal information beforehand eases getting to know someone and minimizes issues that could arise during face-to-face meetings, offering advantages to users (Atkins, 2018). Despite these benefits, reaching a huge audience can make partner selection more difficult (Iyengar and Lepper, 2001). A study found that dating apps, which offer a wide range of potential partners, are associated with self-perception, and users tend to fail when trying to commit to just one person (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006). Another negative effect observed in dating apps is security concerns. Users of dating apps experience various anxieties while using the apps and often do not feel safe, leading to privacy concerns (Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai, 2011). A study conducted in Turkey also found concern

about the possibility of individuals providing false information about themselves on dating apps (Zorbas, Gençtanırım, and Kurt, 2015).

Cyber Harassment

Cyber harassment occurs when individuals or groups targeted on digital platforms are disturbed via social media, email, or instant messaging applications by receiving unwanted messages (Willard, 2007). To identify behaviors as harassment in the digital environment, the action must be repeatable, and the person must be continuously disturbed by someone else (Barındık, 2021). In the digital realm, actions such as sending disturbing messages through social media, virtual platforms, and applications, expressing sexual desires, making offensive comments about a person's appearance, and making derogatory remarks are considered cyber harassment behaviors (Baştürk, 2020). Due to the anonymity available in digital environments and limited oversight, individuals can more comfortably engage in cyber harassment (Akın, 2024). These actions directly affect a person's private life and can lead to unwanted consequences (Çelik and Tekin, 2015). Since this situation is often normalized over time, individuals may find it difficult to distinguish whether they are experiencing harassment or just regular communication. To eliminate this confusion, Willard (2007) stated that when a person begins to worry or fear for their safety and life, it can be considered harassment rather than everyday speech. Henry and Powell (2018) describe cyber harassment as threatening, blackmailing, and coercing individuals using digital tools.

Cyber harassment behaviors include sending disturbing messages to a person using social media, dating apps, and electronic devices; making threats and insulting statements; sending fake messages using someone else's identity; spreading personal information; persistently calling the person in a harassing manner; and making sexual threats (Winkelman, 2015).

Cyber harassment is increasingly common because individuals can hide their identities, and there are no boundaries within applications (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001). Women are especially subjected to sexist comments, discriminatory remarks, and physically degrading language (Andreasen, 2020). Research on cyber harassment began around 2000, and by 2010, studies focused on cyber harassment occurring on social media (Demir, 2023). With the global increase in cyber harassment incidents, it has become a topic of intense focus for researchers (Vitak et al., 2017). In a study conducted on American adults, it was reported that 81% of women and 43% of men have been exposed to sexual cyber harassment, and 23% of women and 9% of men have experienced cyber sexual assault (Stop Street Harassment, 2019). In studies conducted in Turkey, it was found that 21.2% of adolescents have been subjected to cyber harassment (Dönmez, 2017). A 2021 study found that 51% of women and 27% of men had been exposed to written and visual cyber-harassment content in digital environments (Şimşekcan, 2018).

Cyber Harassment Risks and Effects

It is observed that individuals who engage in cyber harassment have various motives. These motives include humiliating the targeted person, displaying hostile behaviors, seeking sexual gratification, and having fun (Henry and Powell, 2016). People can voluntarily engage in sexual conversations, conduct video calls, and share

content online (Bulut, 2023). However, there is a risk that all these may be shared without the person's consent (Drouin and Ross, 2015). With today's technological advancements, it is possible to create content without an individual's consent using information shared on social platforms (Nguyen, 2022). This situation also increases the incidence of cyber harassment.

Sharing personal information in digital environments, using dating apps, presenting oneself differently, and the concern of meeting someone met through an app all involve various risky behaviors (Bulut, 2023). As a result of these behaviors, individuals may experience psychological issues such as depression and anxiety, and feel bad about themselves (Patel and Roesch, 2022). Additionally, psychosomatic symptoms, self-blame, and feelings of helplessness threaten their daily lives (Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020). People who are exposed to cyberbullying experience declines in psychological well-being, and their life satisfaction and self-esteem decrease (Street et al., 2008). In cases of prolonged exposure, individuals may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Avina and O'Donohue, 2002).

It has been observed that individuals subjected to cyberbullying also experience social withdrawal, isolate themselves from society, display blaming behaviors due to their situation, and have disrupted daily routines (UNICEF, 2011).

Discussion

Digitalization has fundamentally changed the way people communicate; dating apps are among the most prominent examples of this change. However, these platforms have also brought a new face of digital violence, due to the anonymity and lack of oversight in the online environment (Barındık, 2021). The literature compiled in this study shows that cyber harassment experienced through dating apps particularly targets female users and that these forms of harassment are not limited to the digital realm but also threaten individuals' psychological, social, and emotional integrity.

Baştürk Akça and Sayımer (2017) emphasize that when identifying types of cyberbullying, the roles of victim and perpetrator often become blurred in digital platforms during interpersonal relationships. In dating applications, this situation manifests in forms such as unwanted sexually explicit messages, digital stalking, threats, and humiliation. Many users, especially young adults with low risk awareness, tend to confuse these behaviors with ordinary dating experiences or avoid reporting the violence they experience (Baştürk, 2020).

On the other hand, most application providers' policies aimed at increasing user safety either remain superficial or are not implemented effectively enough. Bates (2017) states that online gender-based violence is not only an individual issue but also a structural problem; therefore, both application developers and policymakers bear significant responsibilities. In this context, it is necessary to raise awareness among users about digital violence and to develop effective reporting and support mechanisms.

Conclusion

The use of technology, which has become a part of human life, continues to increase rapidly today. As technology has begun to take a central role in human life, social life is also

changing. The weakening of social life, increased work intensity, and reduced time for entertainment have led to changes in how people communicate. The shift from traditional to technology-based communication has created new social networks. Especially in forming close relationships, individuals' preferences have changed. The changing desires and expectations of individuals, along with technological advancements, have made dating apps a part of human life. Humans, as social beings, tend to communicate and form relationships with others at every stage of life. In romantic relationships formed during adulthood, there is a transition from face-to-face environments to social settings. With technological development, individuals have also moved their romantic relationships into digital environments.

Globally, applications that operate as 'Dating Apps' are translated into Turkish as 'Online Dating Applications.' These apps, which recently entered the Turkish market, quickly gained popularity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on individuals' lives, challenging living conditions, and decreased socialization led people to explore romantic relationships through dating apps. Dating apps provide various opportunities, such as saving time, meeting someone regardless of location or place, and getting to know someone beforehand, making them an ideal environment for starting and maintaining relationships. Although each user has different goals, fundamentally, all users prefer to establish either short-term or long-term relationships.

Although dating apps are seen as technology that makes people's lives easier, they also carry certain risks. Misrepresenting oneself, using the app for different purposes, and the ability to remain anonymous can create opportunities for cyber violence. Receiving disturbing messages in the digital environment and continuing this behavior repeatedly and insistently can lead to cyber harassment incidents. Although various cybersecurity measures are in place in these apps, they are sometimes insufficient. When cyber harassment occurs, users may feel bad, experience severe mental distress, and develop

trauma. Because individuals may face these risks from someone they meet face-to-face, users often continue to use dating apps.

Based on this article, the following suggestions have been made for evaluating individuals affected by cyber harassment on dating apps. Individuals who have been subjected to cyber harassment while using dating apps can be provided with access to social and psychological support afterward. Users of dating apps can be offered detailed informational texts within the app to ensure their safety. These should include information about the institutions to which users should turn if they experience cyber harassment. Security measures specifically targeting cyber harassment can be increased within the applications.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Approved by the Ethics Committee of Istanbul University Cerrahpaşa Social and Human Sciences Research (Decision No: 4, Date: 09/19/2023)

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Availability of Data Materials

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Contributions of the Authors

Prof. Dr. Neylan Ziyalar provided academic supervision for the article. Büşra Tulumbacı contributed to all sections of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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