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Digital Platforms and Organizational Communication in Educational Settings

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Abstract

This study explores school administrators' perspectives on the use of digital platforms in organizational communication in primary and secondary schools. A qualitative case study was conducted with 15 school administrators selected through maximum variation sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using inductive content analysis. The findings indicate that administrators use various digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, official school websites, and MEB DYS (the official document management system of the Turkish Ministry of National Education), for different organizational communication purposes, including information sharing, coordination, and enhancing institutional visibility. While participants emphasized both the advantages and challenges of digital platforms, they generally regarded them as valuable tools for supporting organizational communication in schools. The study contributes to a better understanding of digital platform use in educational organizations and offers practical implications for educational leadership and organizational communication practices.

Keywords: School Leadership; Educational Management; Media Richness Theory; Qualitative Research; Digital Communication

Introduction

Digital platforms have become an important part of organizational communication in educational institutions. School administrators and other educational stakeholders now use social media tools, messaging applications, official school websites, and institutional digital communication systems to exchange information, coordinate activities, and maintain institutional relationships. These platforms support rapid information flow, stakeholder engagement, and institutional visibility; however, they may also create problems related to misunderstanding, message control, reliability, privacy, and the balance between formal and informal communication.

Communication is essential for the continuity and effectiveness of organizational processes. With technological advancements, communication processes of both individuals and organizations have changed, and modern organizations have increasingly included technological tools in their communication practices (Aygün & Özmutaf, 2020). One of the most remarkable issues in the field of communication is social media because it is considered a fast, accessible, and low-cost communication tool (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Stoian, 2019). The increasing use of social media by members of organizations and their stakeholders has encouraged organizations to remain active in digital environments (Aygün, 2020). The expansion of internet access and the emergence of social media have also transformed personal, organizational, and inter-organizational communication by moving them away from only traditional forms (Stoian, 2019; Zailskaitė-Jakstė & Kuvykaite, 2012). Educational institutions are among the organizations affected by this transformation, as school administrators use electronic communication tools in their communication processes and expect this use to continue (Sabancı et al., 2016).

Organizational Communication

Organizations are human networks communicating with each other; therefore, communication is a key concept in the study of organizations (Sabuncuoğlu & Tüz, 2003, p. 74). Communication is also an administrative process that makes the organizational structure operational (Günbayı, 2007). The communication process within an organization is referred to as organizational or corporate communication (Aziz & Dicle, 2017, p. 33). In a broad sense, organizational communication includes public relations, organizational reputation, environmental communication, and internal communication (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 20). More specifically, it includes communication processes related to the regulation of organizational structure and operation, the achievement of organizational goals, and the establishment and continuation of intra-organizational, interdepartmental, and inter-organizational relationships (Aziz & Dicle, 2017).

Organizational communication functions as a primary tool for the success or failure of an organization (Benkhoff, 1997). It is also important because it includes the administration, development, and regulation of internal and external communication in line with organizational goals (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 25). Communication

in organizations can be formal or informal. Formal communication refers to communication determined and accepted by the organization itself (Güllüoğlu, 2011, p. 27). However, in modern organizations, cooperation, common vision, conflict management, and new administrative approaches also make informal communication necessary (Aygün & Özmutaf, 2020). Informal communication is therefore as necessary and important as formal communication (Solmaz, 2006). In educational organizations, both types of communication are important because schools require official communication with authorities as well as flexible communication among administrators, teachers, students, parents, and staff.

Thayer (1961) examined organizational communication through informative, evaluative, educative-instructive, and persuasive-impressive functions. These functions indicate that organizational communication is not limited to the transfer of information; it also involves evaluation, guidance, coordination, and influence within organizational processes (Aziz & Dicle, 2017, pp. 90-96). From this perspective, digital platforms used in schools can be considered not only as communication channels but also as tools that shape organizational interaction and administrative communication.

Organizational communication is significant not only for private organizations but also for public institutions and non-profit organizations. Although the concept has been addressed more intensively in profit-oriented organizations, public institutions and non-profit organizations are increasingly under pressure to represent themselves effectively. This has increased their interest in organizational communication, reputation, and public visibility (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 26). Students and members of educational organizations also increasingly turn to digital platforms to maintain social relationships and seek support, as these platforms provide communication affordances that facilitate relationship maintenance and access to resources such as social support (Baines, Ittefaq & Abwao, 2022).

Social Media

Social media is generally considered an informal communication tool that transforms face-to-face communication into virtual and online communication through smart devices. Earlier statistics regarding the use of social media and World Wide Web (www) (2019) showed the rapid expansion of online and digital environments and the increasing attractiveness of social media (Stoian, 2019, pp. 125-127). Social media technologies have become part of modern social routines and allow the production, sharing, and circulation of information to potentially wide audiences (Sumida- Garcia & Costa-Silva, 2017).

Organizations use social media to provide services, construct brand value, and maintain bilateral relationships with target audiences. Educational organizations also use social media to provide services, reach their target groups, and promote their activities. Communication models developed for commercial organizations may also be applied to the social media communication of educational organizations

(Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 174). In this sense, social media presents an educational organization as active, communicative, and responsive to current and prospective students and stakeholders (Stoian, 2019, p. 131; Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 174).

Previous studies show that many platforms serve different purposes in organizational communication. Commonly examined platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Korkmaz et al., 2017; Şengöz & Eroğlu, 2017; Boral Aslan, 2018; Akgemci et al., 2016). The use of social media by organizations also varies by sector. Organizations prefer social media because it provides fast and low-cost access to target groups, and this advantage has enabled social media to be used in large, small, medium-sized, profit-oriented, and non-profit organizations (Şengöz & Eroğlu, 2017; Boral Aslan, 2018). While profit-oriented organizations use social media mainly for customers, promotion, and advertising, non-profit organizations such as educational institutions use it more for informing, communication, and organizational visibility (Boral Aslan, 2018). Research also shows that social media is regarded as an organizational communication tool in profit-oriented organizations (Özdemir & Erdem, 2016) and educational organizations (Korkmaz et al., 2017).

Media Richness Theory is useful at this point because it relates communication media to the requirements of organizational information exchange. Daft and Lengel (1986) emphasize that media differ in their capacity to convey cues, enable feedback, and reduce ambiguity. From this view, digital platforms in schools can be examined not only according to whether they are used, but also according to how well they fit different communication purposes. This perspective supports the analysis of administrators' platform preferences, the reasons for these preferences, and their evaluations of the advantages and disadvantages of digital communication tools within organizational communication processes.

Research Gap

Although the existing literature shows that social media and digital tools are used in different organizational and educational contexts, it still provides limited insight into how school administrators experience these platforms in everyday organizational communication. This point is important because school administrators coordinate communication among teachers, students, parents, staff members, and official authorities.

For this reason, the present study examines school administrators' perspectives on the use of digital platforms in organizational communication. The study focuses on which digital platforms are used, the purposes for which they are preferred, and the advantages and disadvantages associated with their use in school communication processes.

The study aims to show that digital platforms function not only as technical tools but also as socio-organizational instruments that shape information flow, stakeholder

interaction, institutional visibility, and communication culture in educational settings. In doing so, it responds to the need for a better understanding of how digital communication practices shape organizational processes in contemporary schools.

Research Questions

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which digital platforms are used by school administrators for organizational communication?
2. For what communication purposes are these platforms preferred?
3. What advantages and disadvantages do school administrators associate with digital platform use in organizational communication?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the use of digital platforms in educational organizations from an organizational communication perspective and to explore their effects based on the views of school administrators. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand administrators' views and experiences within the context of educational organizations rather than to test a predetermined relationship between variables. Case study is a research method with a distinctive quality that is used to provide in-depth responses to specific problem situations (Büyüköztürk et al., 2010, p. 20). The aim of a case study is to evaluate and analyze one or more cases within their own real-life context in a holistic manner. In this research design, cases can be defined and interpreted separately, comparatively, or using both approaches (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p. 75). In the present study, this design enabled the use of digital platforms in school communication to be examined through the experiences and interpretations of administrators.

Study Group / Participant Selection

The study group consisted of 15 administrators working as principals or vice principals from different primary and secondary schools in a province selected from the Mediterranean region of Turkey. These participants were coded as A1, A2, A3,..., A15 in the study. Maximum variation sampling was utilized at the stage of determining the study group within the scope of non-probability based purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful sampling methods are more suitable for qualitative studies when compared to probability based sampling methods. Hence, purposeful sampling is very effective in determining and explaining the cases and events. One of the purposeful sampling methods, maximum variation sampling aims to demonstrate many aspects of the people and the problem in a sample at the maximum degree by creating the sample that is qualified as small (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, pp. 118-119). In this study, the use of maximum variation sampling was appropriate because the

research focused on school administrators' views and aimed to reflect different administrator profiles within a small qualitative sample. According to the participant information, 14 administrators were principals and one was a vice principal; two participants were female and thirteen were male. In terms of age, eight participants were between 30-45 years old and seven were between 46-60 years old. The participants also differed in their duration of working as teachers and as administrators, which supported the purpose of including varied administrative experiences in the study group.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board prior to data collection (Approval Code: BSAUTAZ434). Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The identities of both participants and institutions were kept confidential, and the data were used solely for scientific research purposes. The use of participant codes from A1 to A15 also supported confidentiality in the presentation of the findings.

Data Collection Tool and Process

A semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers was used in the study. The interview form included three demographic questions to determine the age of the participants as well as their durations of working as a teacher and an administrator. The form was also prepared to obtain data on the social media tools used by educational organizations in the context of organizational communication and their effects. In the process of preparing the interview questions, expert opinions were consulted, a pilot application was conducted, and necessary revisions were made in the semi-structured interview form before the interviews with the administrators in the study group. Interviews were conducted with the participants in a face-to-face manner or through online video meeting platforms. The data were recorded. Thus, the data regarding the social media tools used by educational organizations in the context of organizational communication and their effects were obtained.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by transcribing the recorded interviews. Content analysis was used in the analysis of the data collected to determine the social media tools used by educational organizations in the context of organizational communication and their effects. In content analysis, it is aimed to explain the data and reveal the information regarding the issue in the data. For this purpose, in content analysis, data showing similarity are determined and certain concepts and themes are created, arranged and interpreted. Inductive content analysis was applied in the study in order to interpret the findings through the coding of the data and creation of themes based on the similarities among these codes. Accordingly, the analysis process involved transcribing the recorded interviews, reading the interview texts, coding the relevant statements, bringing similar codes together, creating themes, and interpreting the

findings. The data were described, direct quotes were provided, and explanations and comments were made (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, pp. 242-253).

Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the measures taken to ensure that accurate information is obtained throughout the research process, whereas reliability refers to presenting the data in a detailed, clear, and transparent manner so that other researchers can evaluate the research process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p. 285).

The conceptual framework of the study was reviewed by the researchers, and expert opinions were consulted to ensure its soundness. During the preparation of the interview questions, expert feedback was obtained before conducting interviews with the administrators in the study group. A pilot study was then conducted, and the semi-structured interview form was revised accordingly. The data were collected without any intervention in the participants' responses. In addition, direct quotations from the participants were included in the findings section to support the themes and to make the relationship between participants' views and the researchers' interpretations more explicit. These procedures were implemented to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

Findings

Findings of Qualitative Research Based on Administrator Opinions

Administrators' opinions are presented under several themes in this section.

Regarding the perception of organizational communication, the most frequently emphasized theme was interaction of partners ($f = 9$). This was followed by whole communication in the organization ($f = 6$), working in coordination ($f = 3$), a tool that energizes the organization ($f = 3$), communicating in an organized way ($f = 2$), managing communication ($f = 1$), and a tool that unites the organization ($f = 1$). The opinions of the administrators regarding the theme of interaction of partners are as follows:

"If we describe the organization as a community having certain goals and coming together for these goals, it defines the interaction taking place among its all participants. On school basis, communication covering our students, teachers, employees and parents is organizational communication." (A1)

"As far as I understand, it is all the natural and planned communication and interaction of school partners such as our teachers, school employees and parents in a coordinated way for a particular purpose." (A4)

"For me, the concept of organizational communication refers to the interactions and communication of the staff members and administrators with each other working in an institution. Everyone related to the organization, the teachers, students, parents,

administrators, staff members are all individuals existing in organizational communication.” (A6)

“It involves vertical, horizontal and all types of communication channels and ways of communication, communicative arguments made with all the partners. From the school perspective, as all partners of an organization – teachers, students and our parents and administrative positions, the bureaucratic process, I mean the Ministry of Education, governorship – that is, it is all types of communication between organizational ranks ranging from the bottom to the top level. Either digital or verbal, or written, we can talk about any type of arguments.” (A8)

Regarding the most frequently used way of communication in the organization, informal communication was the most frequent theme ($f = 7$), followed by formal communication ($f = 5$), and both formal and informal communication ($f = 3$). Some opinions regarding the theme of informal communication used frequently are provided below:

“With the provision of having a certain distance, we establish communication with friends based on full sincerity, in other words, informal. I totally establish communication more like a friendship relationship instead of superior-subordinate relationship.” (A3)

“We prefer the informal one more in our school as we are a group consisting of people with similar ages in our school. As in saying, can you do it like a conversation? Can you do it? Without putting it into a text, we solve issues between each other.” (A9)

“I can’t be very formal. The reason is people need to understand you better for them to work in a comfortable and peaceful environment. I need to explain myself better to the parties in the organization. I can’t do this with formally normal communication. Then all of us, the school administrators would be in a certain form. Like let me leave and then another will come, let me leave and another will come. Then, as I told you our communication would be monotonous, but I need to initiate certain dynamics either for the students, or the teachers or the parents. If I made use of communication on all the formal norms to initiate these dynamics, they wouldn’t be initiated. By adding something from myself, seeing them like I see myself, moving on to the path of becoming a unity, I prefer informal communication. In this way, we already get efficiency in education. We get it in exchange for this communication.” (A7)

“We prefer informal communication more because we are sincerer, we can’t write everything down and don’t want to create a burden to the teachers in many ways.” (A12)

On the other hand, the administrators who frequently used formal communication stated that this preference is mainly due to the official nature of educational institutions. In addition, some administrators preferred formal communication because they believed that teachers needed to be encouraged to fulfill their responsibilities or that formal communication was more appropriate.

"It is an official organization therefore its formal side outweighs, but who you are doing it with is also very important." (A6)

The administrators stating that they used informal and formal communication at an equal rate pointed out the situational structure of communication.

"This is actually situational, our communication made with Ministry of Education, Governors and District Governors are formal, but with the public or our citizens, we can call it informal. Both apply for our communication with teachers, in some situations it is informal and in others it is formal." (A8)

After identifying the type of communication they used most frequently, administrators also emphasized the importance of the other type. Although the majority of them mentioned a single type of communication as the frequently used one, all of them used both. The direct quotes of the interviews regarding this are given below:

"We frequently use compulsorily the commands coming from the superiors, so it is formal, but if we use the formal one for motivational process, it includes rewards and punishments, too, and the formal one can be more bothering for people, so I use both informal and formal one, two of them." (A13)

"I use the informal one more, but in some places the informal one may not apply, and then we have to use the formal one." (A15)

Regarding the social media tools used for organizational communication in schools, WhatsApp (f = 15), MEB DYS (the official document management system used by the Turkish Ministry of National Education) (f = 15), and the official website (f = 15) were the most frequently used tools. Facebook was also frequently mentioned (f = 11), followed by Instagram (f = 9), Twitter (f = 7), EBA (f = 1), Zoom (f = 1), and Google Photos (f = 1). Some administrators used the website and MEB DYS tools as an obligation, whereas there were highly active administrators in the use of the website. On the other hand, they qualified WhatsApp as an outcome of the pandemic period. In addition, it plays a key role in both intra-organizational and inter-organizational communication. The main reason for this preference was that WhatsApp enables rapid information flow.

"MEB DYS is on the forefront in correspondences with superior ranks or other public institutions. Except for that, our schools have websites. We make use of Facebook in order to put our announcements or activities on the forefront. The most useful one for us during this pandemic period is WhatsApp." (A2)

"We use WhatsApp mostly. In fact, we use WhatsApp at a significant rate. If you ask why it is WhatsApp, we use it because it is very quick, we can instantly transmit messages, and we can instantly make information transfer." (A14)

"The mostly used one by people currently, for teachers or the society, Facebook is being used. This is why we also use Facebook." (A3)

"We use Facebook as it has a high number of users." (A12)

Regarding the purposes of using organizational communication tools, providing information was the most frequently mentioned purpose ($f = 15$). This was followed by sharing activities ($f = 14$), advertising-reputation ($f = 9$), educative-instructive purposes ($f = 7$), persuasive-impressive purposes ($f = 6$), evaluation ($f = 5$), promoting ($f = 3$), honoring ($f = 3$), instant/rapid communication ($f = 2$), warning-noticing ($f = 1$), and strengthening organizational communication ($f = 1$). The opinions of some administrators regarding information are as follows:

"We use it a lot for information, both with our parents, students and teachers, it is more for the purpose of information." (A3)

"For providing information, advertising and promoting purposes. Like I told you, we use WhatsApp for providing information. Of course, aside from that we use Facebook and Twitter for advertising, promoting and reputation purposes. Our aim in the end is to show how beautiful and quality school we have, that we are open to developments and we coordinate as staff members, teachers, students and the administration all together." (A14)

Advertising-Reputation was among the purposes of the administrators for using social media tools in the context of organizational communication. However, regarding this issue the administrators expressed opposing views on the necessity of advertising and on the fact that there was no need for advertising for public schools. Examples of some opposing views on the issue are given below.

"Social media accounts are our showcase in a way. We use them not only to advertise our school, but also to gain reputation through the advertisements and transmit certain things about the school in general in the announcements section." (A9)

"They see social media platforms as tools for advertising, that is how it is perceived by people. Do our public schools need advertising? I think they don't and shouldn't. Private schools need advertising; they attract students in that way. My advertisement should be related to the school success in the parent's eye." (A7)

Regarding the advantages of social media tools used in educational organizations, opportunity for instant/rapid communication was the most frequently mentioned advantage ($f=8$). This was followed by ability to reach large audiences ($f=7$), receiving positive feedback ($f=5$), increased interest in school ($f=4$), providing chances for criticism ($f=3$), gaining time ($f=3$), convincing for success ($f=2$), opportunities for setting/taking an example ($f=2$), opportunities for the school to be reputed ($f=2$), increased aid to school ($f=1$), and providing student development ($f=1$). The most important administrator opinions regarding instant/rapid communication are as follows:

"The advantage is that you can reach many people simultaneously, in short time and rapidly. The moment you post, that person being online is enough as it notifies on the

screen directly. Let me call it short and effective. We are competing against time in this new era already, it is an advantage for us that it is fast and effective.” (A5)

“The advantage is that we can reach the target mass we want to reach in shorter time and instantly.” (A10)

“Like we are doing now, we can share all the developments related to the agenda in a meeting in a very short time with people, we can share our problems if any. Actually, social media networks and communication tools are the most significant tools, facilitating people’s lives. No matter what they say, it is the fastest communication tool.” (A11)

Regarding the disadvantages of social media tools used in educational organizations, misunderstanding was the most frequently mentioned disadvantage (f=7). This was followed by not being inspected (f=4), security concerns (f=4), negatively affecting face-to-face communication (f=3), shares making people bored (f=3), being open to everyone (f=3), removing the concept of working hours (f=2), increased quota (f=2), information pollution (f=2), informal use (f=2), misleading shares (f=1), causing addiction (f=1), habituating people to the easy way (f=1), and causing unjust competition (f=1). For the causes of being misunderstood on social media, administrators mentioned the difficulty of establishing communication without gestures or facial expressions on social media platforms, unlike in face-to-face communication, the inaccurate way of using Turkish, the receiver having different characteristics, and problems in wording. Some of the views regarding the theme are as follows:

“There are misunderstandings taking place and one should be very careful in order not to be misunderstood or should be careful about conveying our message correctly because no matter how much you know, all of what you explain is as much as what could be understood by the person you talk to. We have every type of parents, every type of students or followers. All of them have different education levels, social, cultural levels, all of them have different perceptions, different expectations, so one needs to be very careful. It is required to use simple, plain and clear statements in a way that all of them will understand correctly.” (A1)

“There can also be those times when we experience serious problems on social media. For example, we need to be very careful about using correct Turkish when we are to give an instruction in the way we address to that person.” (A11)

“I pick things to bits unless X teacher is offended by what I wrote or the parents conclude something from what we share as there are no gestures or mimics there, but just the text in the end and while conveying this text to the respondents, problems may arise sometimes in written language.” (A7)

“The platform where communication can comfortably be made is social media, but sometimes it can be a dangerous tool. It can make or break a person. You know they

say think twice before you talk, you need to think not twice, but three or four times while posting something on social media.” (A13)

Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestions

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of digital communication tools in organizational communication within educational settings. The findings indicate that school administrators actively use digital platforms for information sharing, interaction, and increasing institutional visibility. In addition, administrators tend to prefer informal communication, while also making use of formal communication depending on the situation. This finding is consistent with the studies by Benkhoff (1997) and Gizir and Şimşek (2005), which indicate that effective communication is essential for organizational effectiveness and continuity. It also suggests that digital communication tools do not replace existing communication forms in schools; rather, they become integrated into both formal and informal communication practices.

The results also show that social media tools such as WhatsApp, official school websites, MEB DYS, and Facebook have become important components of school communication processes. In this respect, the findings support earlier research suggesting that digital communication tools are preferred because they provide rapid, low-cost, and practical communication opportunities and facilitate interaction with large groups (Sabancı et al., 2016; Şengöz & Eroğlu, 2017; Korkmaz et al., 2017; Boral Aslan, 2018). From the perspective of Media Richness Theory, this result may indicate that administrators' platform preferences are related to the fit between communication purposes and the characteristics of the medium. In other words, the use of different platforms appears to reflect different organizational communication needs rather than a single, uniform form of digital communication.

Another important result of the study is that digital communication tools are used not only for information sharing but also for sharing school activities and strengthening institutional visibility. Although some administrators viewed advertising and reputation building as more relevant for profit-oriented organizations, others emphasized that these practices may also contribute to quality, recognition, and competitiveness in educational settings. Taken together, these views show that the use of digital platforms in schools should be evaluated not only as a technical communication issue but also as a strategic organizational practice. Digital platforms may therefore contribute to the public representation of schools and to the maintenance of relationships with stakeholders.

At the same time, the findings reveal that although digital communication tools provide important advantages such as speed, accessibility, and reach, they may also create challenges such as misunderstanding, lack of control, and reliability problems. In this regard, the findings are in line with the view that the rapid spread of information on digital platforms may also increase the circulation of inaccurate or misleading content, making critical evaluation of information more important (Konuk & Güntaş, 2019). The findings can also be interpreted through Media Richness

Theory: when a medium does not provide sufficient cues, feedback, or control for a communication task, misunderstanding and reliability problems may become more likely. Thus, the advantages and disadvantages of digital communication appear together; the same speed and accessibility that make these tools useful may also increase the need for careful and responsible use.

These results indicate that school administrators should use digital communication tools in a more conscious, planned, and strategic manner. Improving digital literacy skills among administrators, teachers, students, and parents may help reduce the risks associated with social media use. In addition, developing institutional communication guidelines for school-based digital platforms may contribute to safer and more effective communication processes. The findings also point to the need for clear communication principles regarding which platforms are more suitable for formal announcements, rapid interaction, public visibility, and sensitive communication. Future studies may focus on different educational levels, larger sample groups, or comparative contexts in order to examine the role of digital communication in organizational processes more comprehensively.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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