



GUIDE BUT ENTERTAIN! INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCES OF RAFTING TOURISM PARTICIPANTS

REHBER AMA EĞLENDİREN! RAFTİNG TURİZMİ KATILIMCILARININ DENEYİMLERİNE YÖNELİK BİR ARAŞTIRMA

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Abstract

Rafting is within the category of water sports, making it a suitable leisure activity for both individuals and groups. The services provided by the rafting companies both promote the area's natural beauty and enable the area to grow by promoting tourism. Rafting companies must develop their safety, sanitary, and financial aspects under the demands of the participants to provide qualified services. In order to get certified for companies, participant's experiences are crucial. In this study, it is aimed to evaluate the opinions of the participants about the services offered by the rafting enterprises and the boat guides. To do this, semi-structured interviews with 23 participant of rafting were undertaken. Findings have shown that people value safety and cleanliness in rafting companies as well as professional boat guides and that they have bad experiences with the food, drink, and lodging services offered.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rafting, sporting events, boat guides, participant experience.

Özet

Rafting, su sporları kapsamında bireysel veya grup olarak katılım sağlanan bir boş zaman aktivitesi olarak değerlendirilebilir. Rafting işletmelerinin sunduğu hizmetler hem bölgede doğal çekicilikleri ön plana çıkarmakta hem de turizme kazandırılarak bölge gelişimine katkı sağlamaktadır. Rafting etkinliklerinde kaliteli hizmetlerin sunulması başta güvenlik, hijyen ve ekonomik unsurların katılımcı ihtiyaçlarına yönelik tasarlanmasını gerektirmektedir. Dolayısıyla, rafting işletmelerinin nitelikli hale gelmesi için katılımcı deneyimleri önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışmada, rafting işletmelerinin sunduğu hizmetler ve bot rehberlerine ilişkin katılımcı görüşlerinin değerlendirmesi amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaçla, rafting işletmelerinden hizmet alan 23 bireyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda, bireylerin rafting işletmelerine ilişkin güvenlik, hijyen unsurlarına ve bot rehberlerinin deneyimli olmalarına önem verdikleri, verilen yeme-içme ve konaklama hizmetlerinde olumsuz deneyimlere sahip oldukları ortaya çıkmıştır.

Keywords: Rafting, spor etkinlikleri, bot rehberleri, katılımcı deneyimi.

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1. Introduction

Mountains, rivers, canyons, and streams are attractive places to visit because of their natural riches (Farooque vd., 2008). The goal of nature-based tourist activities and the enterprises that offer these activities in areas with such natural structures is to make the best use of the location. Trekking, jeep safaris, canoe races, paragliding, camping, and rafting are a few examples of sports that are popular in natural settings. These activities are carried out and provided by private tourist companies. Outdoor activities and accommodations in the natural environment are crucial to the growth of the area and the variety of tourism-related goods.

Unlike mass tourism, people tend towards special interest tourism types where they can participate individually or in smaller groups (Kozak vd., 2021). These orientations also catch the eye of specialized tourism companies, who include new applications into their service models to satisfy the needs of visitors participated in such activities. Individuals that specialize in rafting as they do at the beginner, amateur or professional levels prefer the canyons and rafting companies. These places not only provide accommodations like glamping, camping, or bungalows in the forest, but also the chance to participate in water activities as a group. In addition, since rafting activities take place in streams and rivers, especially in natural areas, the areas along the waterfront or the course are considered potential areas for visitors. Also the companies are efficient for their food and beverage needs. It is possible to come across such companies in many regions where rafting is practised. Apart from they service for sports activities, these companies develop their services range with alternative activities such as camping, eating, and drinking, resting, trekking, canyoning, canoeing, zipline and safari on the shores of lakes, rivers, and streams of the same region.

This study aims to assess the visitor experiences within the context of rafting-related companies' services, which are among nature-based tourist activities. Therefore, the activity and service experience of individuals participating in rafting sports and the evaluations of boat guides in this research will contribute to the literature.

2. The concept of rafting tourism

It is known that people have travelled for various purposes and participated in tourism activities since their existence. It is also true that, in recent years, there have been changes in travellers' vacation goals and needs. People tend to choose vacations where they may both meet their rest-entertainment demands and act more actively participate in varied activities, since holidays that were previously focused primarily on rest and entertainment do not satisfy people. This circumstance cleared the path for combining tourism and sports assessment. Rafting has developed into a form of tourism that draws a lot of attention from visitors because it enables them to engage in a sport and fulfil their needs for adventure and entertainment. In the literature,

alongside canoeing and river skiing activities, rafting is evaluated within the context of river sports tourism (Albayrak, 2013: 201). Also, rafting is an activity that involves using just oars in small groups of six to eight people to pass the raft on the river over obstacles without flipping the raft they are on (Kozak et al., 2001). The basis of rafting, which is an extreme water sport performed with boats called rafts, especially in rivers with high flow rates, is the struggle not to overturn or capsize in rapidly flowing streams. The crew is led by a guide or trainer, who also offers directions to the group on how to avoid hitting rocks or other obstacles by staying at the front or back of the boat. Moreover, the boat guides are expected to be well-trained, experienced and know the river route to conduct the group appropriately. By the way, rafting is done with protective and preventive equipment.

Turkey is one of the most popular destinations for rafting because of its geographical features, which include rivers that are ideal for the activity (Flypigs, 2022). In this context, rafting tourism is a type of tourism that is carried out on the river and it is compatible with the environment because it requires natural conditions. Furthermore, it is mostly preferred by young people, so the rivers are considered as a source of financial income, and develops both adventure and entertainment, as well as the team spirit of the participants (Albayrak, 2013; 202).

There are many studies that search the aspects of rafting sport from different perspectives in the literature. Jamal, Aminudin ve Kausar (2019), in their research, they focused on the dominant effects of family members, considering that river rafting is an activity that combines both family tourism and adventure tourism, and revealed that children can also influence their parents in this regard. Therefore, they can ensure that families are affected. In a study that includes the investigation of the rafting tourism potential of the water shores, it has been revealed that the Cipeles river in Indonesia is very suitable for rafting tourism, and the village of Citepok near the river evaluates this potential with its accommodation facilities, safety, health, and rafting services (Nurlaila, Susanto ve Afgani, 2021).

Turkey has a great deal of potential for rafting tourism because of its abundance of streams, rivers, and hilly terrain. To get a piece of the growing mass tourism market, tourism organizations in coastal areas, particularly in Antalya, plan unique adventure programs for travellers staying at their hotels. Tourists benefit the local economy by spending time outside of the lodging facilities owing to these tours.

Destination potential provides benefits for the service content and service quality of rafting tourism enterprises. However, it is important to concentrate on studies that assess the existing situation to grab the attention of both local and international visitors and encourage them to choose different forms of tourism. In this regard, Wu and Liang (2011) explored the link between river rafting experience formation and consumer reaction from a flow theory perspective in their

research in Taiwan. According to their statistical findings, the complexity of the rafting activity and the tourists' rafting ability have a considerable and favourable impact on the experience of the tourist flow. It has been stated that this plays an important role in making it a very popular adventure tourism destination in Taiwan, encouraging tourist satisfaction, and thus positively affecting tourist loyalty. Like this, participants of the river rafting experience were compared on the basis of those who had no prior rafting experience as well as on the basis of the needs, motivations, and expectations of the participants before and after rafting in a study focusing on the motivation and expectations of domestic and foreign tourists interested in rafting. As a result, they suggested the implementation of different marketing strategies for each group (Fluker ve Turner, 2000).

Polat et al., (2016) conducted a research on sustainable rafting tourism planning and management. Based on the Antalya Köprüçay rafting region, they highlighted the negative environmental, social, and economic repercussions of rafting tourism as well as issues including overcrowding, excessive capacity utilization, environmental degradation, and erroneous building while also suggesting sustainable conservation strategies. Gülmez et al., (2019), in their research, concentrated on the issues facing the rafting and water sports industries. In the Köprülü Canyon in Antalya Beşkonak village, the owners of the companies that have a sports tourism activity certificate and that provide rafting services were interviewed, and the business owners were informed about the lack of supervision, unfair competition, natural events, getting a license, national parks, fear of punishment, and unsuitable environments for alternative activities. The current state of Köprüçay Rafting Center was examined by Keleş et al., (2014) using a SWOT analysis, so they suggest solutions for issues like inadequate spatial arrangement and organization, environmental pollution, excessive carrying capacity, excessive competition between companies, parking lot issues, and random structuring to assess the destination potential. As one of the leading branches of nature tourism, it is important to develop this great potential offered by Turkey for river tourism and to promote it in a way that will appeal to large mass of tourists. River tourism, which does not require large investments, forms a whole with the historical, archaeological, cultural, authentic values of the environment and other tourism types. Due to this, other tourist values that may be promoted in the area in an integrated manner were also discovered within the scope of this research when analysing the river tourism potential of rivers. Turkey, a country with abundant natural resources, provides tourists with significant river tourism potential for water sports (rafting, canoeing, and river skiing etc.). River tourism, which is integrated with the historical, archaeological, cultural, and authentic values in Turkey, forms a whole with the environment and other tourism types. There are hundreds of large and small rivers in Turkey, and most of them are suitable for river sports. Accordingly, in this study, the experiences of

individuals participating in rafting were examined in order to evaluate the services provided by the tourism enterprises formed by the investments made in the canyons and rivers, which are among the rich tourism resources. Also, the study aims to give some evaluations for rafting companies to make qualified their services. Since, boat guides are vital for a good experience, it is also aimed to asses the boat guides in this study.

3. Methodology

The study looked at the experiences of the participants in relation to the services offered by the organizations that plan rafting sports events, which are regarded as leisure activities. It aims to make clear which factors influence the experiences. For this purpose, interviews were held with rafting sport participants to understand the experiences of individuals, to reveal their positive and negative views, and to examine their suggestions and complaints (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2011). The reason for using the interview technique is that it reveals the participant's experiences in detail in all its dimensions (Holstein ve Gubrium, 2004). The following questions on their experiences were made of the participants during the interview:

- Why did you choose to take part in the rafting sport activities?
- What aspects do you consider when selecting a company or area for rafting experience?
- What do you think of the boat guides who manage the rafting activity?
- What are your feelings after rafting experience? Would you participate to or recommend the rafting activity?

3.1.Data collecting

The research was focused on Beşkonak rafting companies in the Antalya region, which is where most rafting companies and one of the most well-liked rafting locations, including Köprülü Canyon (Mansuroğlu and Dağ, 2020). People who use these companies' accommodations (tents, hammocks, bungalows), food and beverage offerings, and rafting services were chosen to participate in the rafting activities. The first seven participants were reached in the close circle of the researchers, and the next 16 participants were reached by the snowball sampling method. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared before the interview with the participants for the data collection tool. In the questionnaire, questions were asked about demographic characteristics, business, region, and boat guides. First, a questionnaire was sent to the participants online, and then data were collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews. Before the interviews, participants were asked to agree to an interview by mentioning the purpose and contributions of the research, and data were collected from 23 volunteers between August 30 and September 20, 2021, via 9 written letters and 14 phone calls. The notes and records taken in the questionnaire were written down with the consent of the participants and used in the research. The data collection process was concluded with 23 people after repeated answers and opinions.

3.2.Data analysis

The research datasets were analysed with the content analysis method by adopting the inductive approach. In evaluating the data, a descriptive method was used to detect connections between views. Because there was no previously conceptualized structure in the literature, the data were examined and the findings were interpreted (Huberman and Miles, 2002). The questions in the questionnaire were verified for validity and reliability by taking the opinions of two experts who were competent in their fields and had participated in rafting activities before.

4.Results

The demographic details of the participants are shown in Table 1. In light of this, it is believed that the participants range in age from 19 to 61 and include retired, instructors, employees, clerks, and students. Married (14) and male (15) participants made up most of the participants. Many individuals who emerge have graduated from high school and universities. The participants' rafting sport profiles revealed that they were divided into three groups: beginners (10), amateurs (10) and professionals (3).

Table-1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Vocation	Marital status	Education	Profile
P1	Male	31	Police	Married	Bachelor's	Beginner
P2	Male	35	Banker	Married	Bachelor's	Beginner
P3	Male	29	Academician	Single	Master-Ph.D.	Amateur
P4	Male	25	Student	Single	Bachelor's	Beginner
P5	Male	61	Retired	Married	Bachelor's	Amateur
P6	Female	45	Welder	Married	High School	amateur
P7	Female	28	Salesperson	Single	Bachelor's	Amateur
P8	Female	27	Employee	Single	High School	Beginner
P9	Male	72	Retired	Married	Master-Ph.D.	Professional
P10	Female	41	Engineer	Married	Bachelor's	Professional
P11	Male	55	Teacher	Married	Master-Ph.D.	Amateur
P12	Female	19	Guide	Single	Bachelor's	Professional
P13	Male	36	Veterinary	Single	High School	Amateur
P14	Male	32	Teacher	Married	Bachelor's	Amateur
P15	Male	41	Employee	Married	High School	Amateur
P16	Female	30	Teacher	Single	Bachelor's	Beginner
P17	Female	22	Student	Single	Bachelor's	Beginner
P18	Male	48	Engineer	Married	Bachelor's	Amateur
P19	Male	36	Tradesman	Married	Bachelor's	Beginner
P20	Male	25	Student	Single	Bachelor's	Beginner
P21	Female	32	Housewife	Married	High School	Beginner

P22	Male	35	Clerk	Married	Bachelor's	Beginner
P23	Male	46	Teacher	Married	Bachelor's	Amateur

Source: Created by authors.

4.1. Findings about the participants' choice to go rafting

Most participants admitted that they chose to participate in the rafting activity on the recommendation of their friends and family based on previous experiences. One of the key elements that encourages potential visitors to engage in activities has been identified as previous experiences and confirmation.

P1 said that the rafting activity was successfully completed and that his university mates had previously visited the appropriate firm in the canyon area.

According to P16, rafting requires a waterside setting, and companies near the canyon that offer lodging, food, and drink options typically have good decision-making capabilities. While traveling to a different location in Antalya, P20 made the spontaneous decision to take part. P20 stated, *"We went to see a family friend in Beşkonak village. There were several rafting facilities on the way. We made the decision abruptly since we were interested in family activities. The event and service were fantastic"*. P22 and P23, who preferred rafting companies to evaluate the closure periods that are frequently experienced during the pandemic process, expressed their decision to participate in the following words: *"We realized that we would be bored in the 18-day full closure. Therefore, we wanted to camp to have a different experience. Even camping can be boring too. That's why we did some research and came across the companies here. Rafting is at the forefront here, but we decided to come here because there are activities such as safari and zipline"*. *"We wanted to have a new experience appropriate for the age of our children as a nuclear family in order to avoid spending the restriction at home. We had never engaged in rafting before. My wife and I agreed to take part since the idea excited our children"*.

P3, P4, P7, and P8, who are generally young individuals, stated that they do it every year to have fun and have a good time with their friends. Because of this, they claimed, they made annual trips to go rafting with their friends a tradition. They also claimed that around specific times of the year, they go camping and rafting at various locations. According to the participants' repeated assertions, it can be concluded that the most significant influences on rafting participation are the desire for novel experiences, adventurous curiosity, prior experiences, and the demands of friends or family members for a shared experience. For those who are just starting out, participating in rafting together is vital.

4.2. Findings of the participants' selection of the rafting company or region

Participants were questioned about selecting a company or area for rafting sports activities. Evaluation of the responses reveals that most individuals can camp in Köprülü Canyon (Antalya-

P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P15, P16, P17) and worldwide (Rouge River-P6, Arathos-P10, Poudre Canyon-P12). It has been discovered that they appreciate the riverbanks, which are where nature is.

The following assertions support the idea that the natural environment is the main element influencing participants' choices for an area or type of activity. The P14 rafting sport event, for instance, has the following qualities of location: *"We like places immediately next to rivers, where we can sleep with the sound of water, get up to the sound of water, have breakfast, and then conduct adrenaline-filled rafting. Companies that provide kid-friendly activities are also more favourable. The ideal companies are those with converted pool sections that provide youngsters with a unique swimming environment because of the stream.* It is important for families with children to have special activities and activity areas. P20 explains that he preferred Köprülü Canyon for the region's selection and the reasons are as follows: *in addition to calm areas, natural settings, and rafting, I chose enterprises that provide a variety of activities. Considering that rafting is a regular pastime in Köprülü Canyon. However, it would be more entertaining to float across the canyon and leap off several platforms.*

Apart from the natural environment, offering economical, secure, sanitary, and convenient transportation stands out among the options that the companies and organizations provide to the participants. P2 and P3 expressed the following features: *being clean and safe, not crowded, being in touch with nature, ease of transportation, and various eating and drinking opportunities* in their business preferences. Additionally, P22 and P23 mentioned that they particularly prefer companies that provide Wi-Fi service. TV broadcast and Wi-Fi service are especially important for families with children. P19 stated that they avoid queues and crowded companies and prefer companies that provide many *hygienic toilets, showers, and 24-hour hot water services.*

Since rafting is an activity that appeals to all segments and can be attended by all age groups, the fact that it includes body rafting, water games, and natural jumping tracks contributes to the preference of companies. In this regard, P16 and P17 believe that it would be ideal for rafting companies to differentiate from one another and gamify the rafting experience, much like an animated show. Regarding this, P12 states the following: *"We have been visiting the rafting company for many years. Every season, they come up with a new activity to keep us entertained. We occasionally engage in group water sports tournaments and water battles while we are rafting. The explanation for the choice is that they design water playgrounds in designated water areas for kids and snap photos.*

Professional rafters encourage participants to focus on more specific technical considerations while selecting a company or area. For instance, P9 stated that *"the stream's water velocity is crucial for rafting. The areas with heavy water flow and more incised riverbanks are my*

favourites. Thus, the action becomes more thrilling. Typically, the winter months see a greater water flow rate". On the other hand, P10 claims that when it comes to rafting, she favours areas/companies that "offer individual rafting possibilities, are near to the stone barriers of the water level, and have tough courses compared to the riverbed".

4.3. Findings Regarding Boat Guides in Rafting

Boat guides are individuals who accompany the group along the riverbed during the rafting activity. The boat guides guide the group according to the water current behind the rafting boat. Rafting activities are often conducted in private for beginners or in groups of 8–10 people. Given that there is currently no certification system for boat guides, companies educate people internally. P1 responded to the inquiry over the boat guidelines by saying the following: *"Guides are often young, and while ours was as well, we soon discovered he lacked experience. We observed the guide in the other group having fun with the tourists on the boat. In addition to being educated, guides should also be entertaining and enjoyable".* Similarly, P2 and P3 stated that they were overly prescriptive, cold, and ordinary for the boat guide's behaviour. P6 underlined that the boat guides were untrained and recommended that they have specific training in order to give a better qualified service. They should also have features that amuse the participants, make them laugh, and create a fun environment. On the other hand, P10 stated that their guides were not professional and acted uninterestedly and expressed the following words: *"Our guide wasn't reassuring. In some parts, we came across quite hard rocks. We wanted to jump into the water on the jumping platforms, but he did not allow us to stay behind the group".*

Some of the companies use the claim that they employ experienced guides to draw participants to the event. According to P18, *"All the staff in the business were good. Our boat guide was very interested, we had fun at the water's edge wherever we wanted. He gave us confidence because he was experienced".* P19 had this to say about the boat guides: *"Rafting was fantastic, our boat guide was already pursuing a career as a ship captain overseas, and he was a really accomplished and interesting individual. I went rafting a lot, but this guide made it a lot more fun.*

The responses indicated that it is crucial that the boat leaders be comforting, knowledgeable, amusing, and enthusiastic people who will make sure that the rafting participants have a good time. Professional training for local companies and boat guides, as well as the accreditation of guides in the region through certification programs, can be considered in this perspective as being essential for providing better services.

4.4. Observations following the rafting experience

The following statements were used by participants to describe their opinions of the rafting experience:

P1- *"I try to do the rafting event at least once a year. Perfect for energy and stress relief. Even though you are physically tired at the end of the day, you feel a sense of mental relief"*.

P15- *"They are not like other companies; the prices are very reasonable. They did not raise prices during the pandemic. Also, thank you very much for taking our photos without getting bored and sending them to us for free. You can go with peace of mind"*.

P19- *"The back of the facility leads to one of the rafting stops. It has a swimming area and a small pier to jump into the water from. Cleanliness and attention are good. It was very enjoyable thanks to our rafting captain"*.

The focus points of the participants who gave positive opinions are mostly about meeting their expectations for the experience during the event and the characteristics of the tour guides. In addition, it is seen that both the services of the enterprise and their experience of rafting activities are given to the boat guides.

The evaluation of the responses provided by the participants who gave negative feedback reveals that they were related to the company's cleaning and safety requirements, the rafting experiences, the level of entertainment satisfaction with the rafting activity, and the general quality of the food and beverage services provided alongside the rafting activity.

The following provides an example of the responses provided by the participants:

P4- *"It wasn't as exciting as I thought. The drivers are careless. At least, a more trusting environment can be created"*.

P22- *"As the air needles were exposed on the inside of the boat, the air of the boat went down frequently. Such a mistake should not be, in addition, the tour guide was insufficiently experienced, and lastly, the chicken food provided at the end of the tour was provided cold, which was average."*

5. Conclusion

Rafting is a type of leisure activity that emphasizes the quest for adventure, thrills, and new encounters among its participants. While individuals participating in rafting tourism meet their entertainment, adventure, and adrenaline needs from streams and rivers, they also meet their accommodation and food and beverage needs from companies that serve on the waterside. Rafting tourism includes recreational water activities as one of the special interest tourism types within the scope of adventure tourism. Tourists that go rafting are often independent, success-driven, nature-loving, adventure-seeking people (Schreyer and Roggenbuck, 1978).

The main goals for rafting participants are fun and excitement, but they also want to enjoy themselves with a knowledgeable guide (Fluker and Turner, 2000). Companies and boat guides that provide this are preferable for users. Companies that provide rafting excursions with experienced boat guides may draw both domestic and international visitors by combining

entertainment, excitement, and adventure into their service offerings. Many studies can be found in the literature on adventure tourism participation motivations and evaluations (Molera and Abaladejo, 2007; Buckley, 2012; Jamal et al., 2019; Gülmez et al., 2019). In this study, similarly, the experiences of rafting tourism participants, one of the adventure tourism types, regarding business and boat guides are focused. The results of the study were discussed under four headings: findings about the participants' choice to go rafting; findings of the participants' selection of the rafting company or region; findings regarding boat guides in rafting; and observations following the rafting experience. According to the results of the participant profile, it can be concluded that the majority of people who engage in the rafting activity at the beginner level are young and middle-aged.

In their assessments of the establishments, the participants listed a number of aspects, including safety, cleanliness, and the surrounding environment. When rafting, people look for the greatest thrill, adventure, and enjoyment. Companies and activity-oriented expectations are important for quality service. Another important factor that emerges during the rafting event is the quality of the boat guides. In particular, untrained guides pose a trust problem. As a matter of fact, Gülmez et al. (2019), in their studies focusing on the problems of rafting enterprises, drew attention to the existence of problems related to enterprises and guides. It is a problem for the guides to specialize in a subject that is not professional and has no training. This situation is similar in terms of developing recommendations on certification and auditing in the same study. Demiray (2022) came to a similar conclusion in her research and recommended using qualified and experienced guides when rafting.

It has been concluded that businesses that offer rafting activities contribute to customer satisfaction by making the event more exciting and supporting it with various activities. In this context, businesses can offer more than one activity to rafting sport participants by incorporating natural attractions into their service processes. It is understood that individuals participating in activities generally prefer businesses that offer camping opportunities and make short-term stays. This result reveals that individuals prefer that region only for rafting activities. Providing different services together and directing them to these participants can contribute to both the economy and the tourism potential of the region (Koç, 2019).

6. Limitations and Future Studies

The purpose of this study was to explore the rafting sport participants' experiences. The research limitation is the participants who visit the Köprülü Canyon and receive the services offered by the businesses in that region. In future studies, quantitative or mixed studies can be conducted by including more participants and rafting businesses in different regions. For domestic and international visitors looking for adventure and excitement, it is possible to advise that locations

produce goods that prioritize service quality. Additionally, intensifying rafting competitions and professional matches in the pertinent areas can present a chance for the region to be promoted as well as for various academic studies to be conducted.

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Ethical Committe Approval:

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Statement of Contribution Rate:

The study authors have an equal contribution rate.

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There is no conflict of interest or gain in the article.