

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Perceptions of female athletes regarding career barriers: Evidence from Turkey

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Abstract

Background: Female athletes often face unique challenges in their career progression due to societal perceptions and gender inequality. These barriers can significantly hinder long-term success and lead to premature termination of athletic careers. In the Turkish cultural context, such challenges are further reinforced by patriarchal family expectations, uneven regional opportunities, and entrenched gender norms, underscoring the importance of examining barriers in both global and local dimensions. **Objective:** This study aims to identify and analyze the career barriers experienced by female athletes in Turkey, with a particular focus on the influence of cultural context, social structure, gender norms, and lack of support on their sporting careers. **Methods:** Using Q methodology, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, data were collected from 22 female athletes selected through snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate authentic statements, which were then used in a Q sort process. Data analysis was carried out using principal component analysis via PQMethod software. **Results:** Participants' responses clustered under a single dominant factor. The most significant barriers identified included misguidance from coaches ($Z = 1.426$), lack of opportunities in residential areas ($Z = 1.408$), insufficient coaching knowledge ($Z = 1.152$), economic difficulties ($Z = 1.124$), and patriarchal family structures ($Z = 1.112$). These findings highlight the multidimensional and context-specific nature of the obstacles female athletes face. **Conclusions:** The study underscores the need for structural reforms in sports environments to support female athletes. In Turkey, patriarchal family expectations and regional inequalities play a decisive role in shaping women's sporting trajectories. Addressing these barriers requires both locally grounded interventions and globally informed strategies. This research contributes to the development of inclusive practices that can promote career sustainability for women in sports.

Keywords: gender disparities in sports, obstacles to female athletes' career progression, challenges for women athletes in sports

Introduction

The career development of female athletes is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural dynamics. Prior research has highlighted that gender-based stereotypes, limited access to resources, and insufficient social support often overshadow the potential of female athletes and frequently lead to the premature termination of their sporting careers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Wicker, 2023). Gendered norms within sport construct perceptions of which disciplines are considered "appropriate" for women, weaken their motivation, and reduce their self-efficacy (Mascarin et al., 2019). Moreover, in cultures where patriarchal values are dominant, women's athletic performance is often devalued, and the pursuit of long-term sporting careers is discouraged (Cooky et al., 2015).

In the Turkish context, a similar pattern can be observed. Although the number of female athletes has increased in recent years, gender inequality remains persistent. Recent data indicate that the proportion of licensed female athletes stands at approximately 37% (Gender Equality Monitoring

Association, 2023). Representation in decision-making bodies, however, remains much lower: according to the Sports and Physical Activity Association for Women report, 25 sports federations do not have any female members on their executive boards (Sports and Physical Activity Association for Women, 2023). Likewise, data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) demonstrate that women occupy only 7.3% of executive positions across the ten national Olympic sports federations (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). These findings suggest that while women are becoming more visible in the field, they remain severely underrepresented in leadership and decision-making structures, indicating the continued presence of a "glass ceiling" in Turkish sport.

In addition, balancing athletic and educational commitments is another significant challenge for female athletes (Condello et al., 2019; Lupo et al., 2015). Female athletes are often directed toward academic achievement while their sporting careers are relegated to a secondary status (García-Solà et al., 2023). Coaching practices also play a critical role in shaping women's athletic experiences.

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Coaches' communication styles, leadership approaches, and emotional support directly affect athletes' motivation, well-being, and performance (Shipherd et al., 2018). In particular, when male coaches adopt patriarchal perspectives, they may undermine women's autonomy and limit their agency (Hovden & Tjønndal, 2017).

The career barriers encountered by female athletes in Turkey are therefore closely tied to both societal norms and institutional structures. Research designs that integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches and place athletes' lived experiences at the center are essential for revealing these structural and cultural constraints. This study aims to provide a culturally contextualized perspective by examining the career barriers faced by Turkish female athletes in depth. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the literature while offering policy recommendations and structural insights to support women's sustainable career engagement in sport.

Methods

Research method

This study, which investigates the career barriers faced by female athletes, utilizes Q methodology, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research elements. Q methodology is recognized for its integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Klaus et al., 2010). It involves participants sorting a set of statements or propositions based on their subjective perspectives on a specific research topic. This method focuses on uncovering shared viewpoints or thought patterns (qualitative aspect) rather than merely analyzing numerical distributions across a broader population (quantitative aspect), see McKeown and Thomas (2013).

The application of Q methodology generally involves a structured process comprising four stages: defining the research topic, developing a set of relevant statements, selecting participants, having participants rank the statements, and conducting statistical factor analysis to identify patterns in responses (de Jonge et al., 2017).

This research employed both structured and unstructured approaches. The structured approach involved adapting questionnaire items from findings of previous studies on similar topics. The unstructured approach, in turn, was based on data collected directly from participants, from which new questions were generated to extend the scope of the research (Demir & Kul, 2011).

Study group

The study was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 female athletes who had not achieved their desired level of success in sport. These interviews were designed to identify perceived barriers in athletes' career development and to generate authentic statements for the Q sample. Following a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, representative statements were formulated for inclusion in the Q set.

In the second stage, the finalized Q sample was administered to another group of 22 female athletes who,

similarly to the interview group, had not achieved their desired sports goals, through the Q sort procedure. These participants were asked to rank the statements according to their subjective views regarding the significance of each barrier. The collected Q sorts were then subjected to factor analysis using PQMethod software.

All participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the research and provided written informed consent prior to participation. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. The study protocol was approved by the Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Ethics Committee and conducted in compliance with international ethical standards for research involving human subjects. For confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) were assigned and are used in the presentation of qualitative findings.

Data collection

Tools

The data collection tools used in this research included a personal information form, a semi-structured interview form, and a Q sort. The Personal Information Form collects data on variables such as the duration of sports participation and the specific sports disciplines practiced.

Data collection tool for the qualitative aspect of the research

For the qualitative dimension of the research, a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher was utilized. Prior to formulating the questions for the interview form, a review of the literature related to career barriers faced by women was conducted. Based on the interviews with participants, factors contributing to career barriers for female athletes were identified, which facilitated the development of questions for the Q sort.

Integration of interview data into Q sort

To construct the Q sample, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 female athletes prior to the Q sort development. These interviews aimed to capture a wide range of personal experiences and perceptions regarding career-related obstacles. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a preliminary thematic analysis using an inductive approach.

Through open coding, researchers identified recurring concepts such as economic hardship, coaching bias, lack of support, societal pressure, and geographical limitations. These codes were grouped under broader themes, which were then used to generate 28 representative statements for the Q sort. The goal was to ensure that the Q sort reflected a comprehensive cross-section of barriers experienced by participants.

Sample statements generated from interviews included: "My coach ignored my development needs" or "My family believed sports were inappropriate for girls". These statements were then reworded into neutral or bipolar expressions to fit the forced-distribution Q sort structure.

Qualitative coding and thematic analysis

The interview transcripts obtained from the 15 preliminary participants were analyzed using an inductive open coding approach. In the first step, meaningful phrases related to perceived career barriers were identified line by line. In the second step, these codes were grouped into broader categories in order to reduce fragmentation and highlight conceptual similarities. This step was necessary to organize numerous individual codes into more manageable clusters before refining them into overarching themes. Finally, the categories were refined into themes following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework of thematic analysis. This process ensured both internal consistency within themes and external distinctiveness across themes.

Data collection tool for the quantitative aspect of the research

For the quantitative phase of the research, the Q sort was employed as the data collection tool. Drawing from the literature review and insights gained from the semi-structured interviews, a total of 28 items were developed, representing factors that contribute to career barriers for female athletes across five dimensions. The items in the Q sort were organized according to a forced distribution method, where item rankings were arranged in a decreasing order from neutral to negative and positive expressions.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the PQMethod 2.35 software (Schmolck, 2014). Data collected through the Q sorts were manually entered into the PQMethod program. Principal component analysis was employed to analyze the data. Although the initial analysis extracted two components, only one factor met the threshold for statistical and theoretical interpretability. Therefore, the study proceeded with a single-factor solution for interpretation. Participants who yielded significant results within the same factor were identified and marked with an X. To determine the significance level of the participants' responses, the statistical formula $(2.58 * (1 / \sqrt{n}))$ was applied (Demir & Kul, 2011). The values represent the degree to which a participant's Q sort aligns with the shared viewpoint represented by this factor. A loading above ± 0.49 was considered statistically significant.

Qualitative data analysis procedure

The qualitative component of the study followed a thematic analysis approach, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were analyzed using manual coding, and the process consisted of the following six steps:

1. Familiarization: All transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion in the data and to capture initial impressions of recurring ideas.
2. Initial coding: An inductive, open coding approach was applied line by line to the transcripts. Each meaningful or recurrent phrase was assigned a code to capture its core idea (e.g., *lack of facilities*, *coach pressure*).
3. Grouping into categories: To avoid excessive fragmentation, the initial codes were organized into broader categories that captured shared meanings. This intermediate step was necessary to increase conceptual clarity and reduce overlap between similar codes. For example, codes such as *coach pressure*, *favoritism*, and *incorrect training* were grouped under the category *Coaching Misguidance*.
4. Theme construction: Categories were further clustered into higher-order themes that represented overarching patterns in the data. For instance, the category *Coaching Misguidance* contributed to the broader theme *Coach Factor*.
5. Theme review and refinement: All themes were reviewed across participants to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness from one another. Overlapping categories were merged, and unclear ones were refined.
6. Defining, naming, and integration: Final themes were clearly labeled and defined, resulting in nine major themes. These themes not only structured the interpretation of interview quotes but also directly informed the development of the Q sort statements used in the quantitative component of the study.

Results

According to Table 1, the barriers affecting female athletes' careers display a multidimensional structure. The codes indicate that at the individual level, the coach factor and educational life stand out, while at the structural level, economic difficulties, environmental limitations, and gender inequality are prominent. In addition, external factors such as public health crises directly shape athletes' experiences. This demonstrates that the career progression of female

Table 1 Codes, categories, and themes

Initial Code	Category	Theme
Coach ignored my needs	Coaching misguidance	Coach factor
Training caused injury	Coaching misguidance	Coach factor
No equipment available	Economic hardship	Economic barriers
Couldn't afford nutrition	Economic hardship	Economic barriers
Family disapproved of sport	Social pressure	Lack of social support
Sports are for men	Gender stereotypes	Gender inequality
No facility in my town	Geographical limitations	Environmental barriers
No women's team nearby	Geographical limitations	Environmental barriers
Public health crisis stopped sport	External constraints	Pandemic-Related health risks
Education life conflicts with sport	Educational difficulties	Education life

athletes is determined by the interplay of both personal and societal conditions.

According to Figure 1, the Q sort grid used in the research is arranged in a scale ranging from -4 to $+4$, indicating the level of importance assigned to each statement.

Building on the coding framework presented in [Table 1](#), [Table 2](#) summarizes the themes pertaining to career barriers faced by female athletes, together with the paired Q sort statements. These statements, framed in both positive and negative forms, operationalize each theme in the Q method analysis.

According to Table 2, nine distinct themes related to the career barriers faced by female athletes were identified through thematic coding of the data collected in the study, considering both participant opinions and existing literature. The numbers in parentheses following each statement refer to the original item numbers used in the Q sort distribution. These identifiers were utilized during the ranking process by participants and are listed here to preserve traceability and clarity in referencing the original statements. The second column of the table presents selected Q sort statements corresponding to each theme. The numbers in parentheses indicate the original statement ID used in the Q sort distribution. Each theme was derived from a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, and the corresponding statements were grouped accordingly.

Table 3 presents the factor loadings of participants on the retained factor. Only one factor was retained for interpretation based on its statistical strength and conceptual coherence.

Z-scores and statement ranking

During factor interpretation, *Z*-scores were computed for each Q sort item to reflect the relative agreement or disagreement of participants associated with the extracted factor. Higher positive *Z*-scores indicate greater perceived importance of the barrier, while negative *Z*-scores indicate disagreement or lower relevance among the participants.

aligned with the factor. The statements were ranked from highest to lowest based on these Z-scores to determine the most salient career barriers experienced by female athletes. According to Table 4, the importance ranking of the Factor 1 statements revealed that the highest positive z-scores were associated with the following statements: (6) “Not being guided correctly by the coach is a big obstacle for my sports career”, (7) “Lack of sufficient sporting opportunities where I live is an obstacle for my career”, and (12) “My coach’s lack of knowledge is an obstacle for my sporting career”. Z-scores indicate the relative level of agreement or perceived importance of each statement within the single retained factor. The numbers in parentheses correspond to the original Q sort item numbers. Statements with higher Z-scores were considered more significant career barriers by the participants grouped under the extracted factor.

Perceptions of female athletes regarding career barriers

Building on the broader discussion of rumination and entitlement, it is also important to contextualize these findings within the lived experiences of female athletes. While the quantitative results highlighted psychological mechanisms, the qualitative data provide a complementary perspective by illustrating how social, cultural, and structural barriers intersect with individual cognition. These narratives shed light on the everyday realities that shape athletes' opportunities and constraints, thereby deepening the interpretation of the study's findings.

The qualitative responses of female athletes provided deep insight into the nuanced barriers they encountered. In the Q sorting procedure, participants ranked the statements along a forced distribution, which allowed for the identification of shared viewpoints and clustering of perspectives. By analyzing these sorting patterns, overarching thematic dimensions were extracted that captured commonalities across participants' subjective experiences. These

Figure 1 Q string used in the research

[illegible]

perceptions can be categorized under key thematic dimensions identified through the Q sort analysis:

1. **Economic Constraints and Resource Access:** Several participants described how insufficient financial resources hampered their ability to meet basic athletic needs such as equipment, nutrition, and attire, leading to decreased motivation and early withdrawal from sport (e.g., Participant 3).
2. **Coaching Challenges and Misguidance:** Coaching emerged as a central barrier. Participants shared experiences of incorrect training methods, performance misjudgment, or lack of coach expertise, which directly affected their confidence, health, and commitment to sports (e.g., Participant 5, Participant 9, Participant 12).
3. **Societal Gender Norms and Stereotypes:** Respondents frequently cited societal perceptions that labeled sports as a male domain, leading to familial pressure and societal disapproval. These gendered expectations not only shaped external opportunities but also internalized beliefs about their legitimacy in sport (e.g., Participant 7, Participant 15).
4. **Environmental and Geographical Disadvantages:** Living in rural or under-resourced areas also significantly limited access to sports facilities, female teams, or

competitions. This environmental factor was emphasized by multiple participants (e.g., Participant 11).

5. **Family Influence and Decision Pressure:** Some participants recounted being directed toward specific sports by family members or having to deprioritize sport due to traditional gender expectations, which led to indecision or disengagement (e.g., Participant 2, Participant 14).
6. **Institutional Power Imbalances:** One athlete described how a coach denied her a career-advancing transfer opportunity for personal gain, reflecting a deeper issue of power asymmetry within sports institutions (e.g., Participant 9).

These narratives emphasize how structural, relational, and cultural dimensions collectively shape the sporting trajectories of female athletes, often leading to early disengagement despite high potential.

Discussion

The present study explored the perceived barriers to career progression among female athletes in Turkey by employing a Q methodological framework. The findings revealed a constellation of interrelated impediments, including lack

Table 2 Themes pertaining to career barriers faced by female athletes

Theme/Question statements
Lack of social support
Not getting enough support from the people around me is an obstacle for my sporting career. (4)
The lack of support from people around me for my sporting career cannot be considered as a career barrier. (18)
Lack of proper orientation in sport can be characterised as a career barrier. (5)
Lack of orientation in sport cannot be considered a career barrier. (19)
Not being guided correctly by your coach is a big obstacle for my sports career. (6)
Not being guided correctly by my coach does not hinder my career. (20)
Economic difficulties
Lack of financial return is an obstacle for my sporting career. (1)
The fact that my branch of sport has no financial return cannot be considered as an obstacle for my career. (15)
Economic problems are an obstacle for my sporting career. (2)
Economic difficulties are not an obstacle for my career. (16)
Value judgement of society
The value judgements adopted by society are a major obstacle for my sporting career. (9)
Value judgements adopted by the society do not constitute an obstacle for my career. (23)
Patriarchal family structure is a barrier to women's sporting careers. (10)
Patriarchal family structure is not an obstacle to a sporting career. (24)
Gender inequality
Inequality between men and women in society is an obstacle for my sporting career. (13)
Gender inequality between men and women in society is not an obstacle for my sporting career. (27)
Coach factor
The fact that my coach does not evaluate my performance correctly and favours others is an obstacle for my sporting career. (14)
The fact that my coach does not evaluate my performance correctly and registers someone else is not an obstacle to my sporting career. (28)
My coach's lack of knowledge is an obstacle for my sporting career. (12)
The fact that my coach does not have sufficient knowledge in his/her field is not an obstacle to my sporting career. (26)
Pandemic-Related health risks
Pandemic-related health risks led to the end of my sporting career. (11)
Pandemic-related health risks are not an obstacle to my sporting career. (25)
Education life
I think that education life is an obstacle to my sporting career. (3)
It is not correct to define my education life as an obstacle to a sporting career. (17)
Sport perception
The fact that the people around me defined sport as an unnecessary endeavor prevented my career. (8)
The fact that the people around me define sport as an unnecessary endeavor does not constitute a barrier to my career. (22)
Living place facilities
Lack of sporting opportunities where I live is an obstacle. (7)
Lack of sporting opportunities where I live is not an obstacle. (21)

of social support, economic hardship, societal value judgments, gender-based discrimination, inadequate coaching, public health concerns, regional disparities, and negative perceptions of sports within the broader social context. These barriers, often intersectional in nature, reflect both structural inequalities and lived individual experiences, and resonate with prior international research while highlighting the specificity of the Turkish context.

Economic hardship emerged as a particularly salient theme, with participants identifying financial limitations as a key constraint on their athletic development. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which highlights economic challenges as a central determinant of women's career opportunities and long-term engagement in sport (Jayachandran, 2021; Mogaji et al., 2021). In Turkey, where financial support for women's sport remains limited and sponsorship opportunities are scarce, these economic barriers become even more pressing. Insufficient resources often result in restricted access to equipment, training environments, and competitive opportunities, thereby constraining both athletic performance and career mobility.

Gender inequality, rooted in cultural expectations and patriarchal norms, also constituted a prominent barrier. This aligns with prior studies that emphasize how deeply ingrained gender roles and structural discrimination systematically disadvantage women in athletic contexts (Cadaret et al., 2017; Frear et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2015). However, in Turkey, this inequality is further reinforced by traditional family expectations that prioritize domestic roles over sporting careers (Gender Equality Monitoring Association, 2023). Such dynamics not only restrict access to resources and decision-making positions but also shape women's self-perceptions and sense of legitimacy as athletes.

Lack of social support surfaced as another critical impediment, reflecting the importance of family and community networks in sustaining athletic careers. Research indicates that female athletes without familial or institutional support are more likely to experience diminished motivation and resilience (Brown et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2018; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). In the Turkish context, this challenge is compounded by cultural discourses

framing sport as predominantly a male endeavor, limiting women's legitimacy in pursuing athletic ambitions.

Coaching misguidance was consistently noted by participants, particularly in the form of neglect of individual preferences or gender-biased practices. These findings are consistent with earlier studies emphasizing the impact of inadequate coaching practices on female athletes' autonomy (Edmunds et al., 2016). In Turkey, where the proportion of female coaches remains low (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024), male-centric coaching paradigms often dominate, further constraining the agency of female athletes.

External shocks such as public health crises also influenced career trajectories. Participants highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on training continuity and mental well-being. This finding resonates with

Table 3 Factor distributions

Participant number	Factor 1
1	0.86 X
2	0.63 X
3	0.81 X
4	0.76 X
5	0.84 X
6	0.78 X
7	0.77 X
8	0.73 X
9	0.80 X
10	0.86 X
11	0.83 X
12	0.83 X
13	0.86 X
14	0.79 X
15	0.84 X
16	0.86 X
17	0.79 X
18	0.79 X
19	0.84 X
20	0.73 X
21	0.88 X
22	0.80 X

Note. The values in the table indicate participants' loadings on the factor. Those above the significance threshold (± 0.49) are marked with an "X".

Table 4 Ranking of scores for career barriers in Factor 1 among female athletes

Question statements	Z-score
Not being guided correctly by the coach is a big obstacle for my sports career. (6)	1.426
Lack of sufficient sporting opportunities where I live is an obstacle for my career. (7)	1.408
My coach's lack of knowledge is an obstacle for my sporting career. (12)	1.152
Economic problems are an obstacle for my sporting career. (2)	1.124
Patriarchal family structure is a barrier to women's sporting careers. (10)	1.112
Lack of proper orientation in sport can be characterised as a career barrier. (5)	1.095
Inequality between men and women in society is an obstacle for my sporting career. (13)	0.918
The fact that my coach does not evaluate my performance correctly and favours others is an obstacle for my sporting career. (14)	0.899
I think that education life is an obstacle to my sporting career. (3)	0.863
The value judgements adopted by society are a major obstacle for my sporting career. (9)	0.850
The fact that the people around me defined sport as an unnecessary endeavour prevented my career. (8)	0.747
Not getting enough support from the people around me is an obstacle for my sporting career. (4)	0.699
Lack of financial return is an obstacle for my sporting career. (1)	0.574
Public health risks led to the end of my sporting career. (11)	0.363

international evidence on pandemic-related disruptions (Jia et al., 2023; Pons et al., 2020) but underscores how already fragile support structures in Turkey exacerbated the negative impact.

Geographical inequality emerged as another noteworthy barrier, particularly for athletes from rural or under-resourced regions. These participants reported limited access to facilities, professional coaching, and competitive platforms, echoing international findings on regional disparities (Robnik et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2023). In Turkey, where sports infrastructure is unevenly distributed (Koca, 2021), geographical inequality has a direct effect on the sustainability of women's athletic careers.

Finally, negative societal perceptions of women's participation in sport were perceived as detrimental to career advancement. These perceptions diminish athlete confidence, weaken family support, and delegitimize female athletic achievement (Knight et al., 2018). Within the Turkish cultural context, where women's achievements in sport often receive limited media coverage, such attitudes present an additional barrier to recognition and sustained engagement.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. The relatively small sample size ($N = 22$) and the use of snowball sampling restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, as the participants were exclusively drawn from the Turkish cultural context, the results may not fully reflect the experiences of female athletes in other sociocultural environments. Finally, the focus on specific sports disciplines limits the breadth of perspectives across all athletic domains. Future research should therefore employ larger and more diverse samples and comparative cross-cultural designs to deepen the understanding of these barriers.

Conclusions

This study identified a range of interconnected barriers hindering the career development of female athletes in Turkey, including misguidance from coaches, lack of support and infrastructure, economic constraints, societal gender norms, and limited access in under-resourced regions. While these findings parallel international evidence, the results also highlight context-specific challenges shaped by Turkey's socio-cultural and institutional landscape.

The findings call for targeted policy interventions and structural reforms that address the multifaceted barriers confronting female athletes. Enhancing financial support systems, promoting gender-sensitive coach education, expanding sports infrastructure in rural regions, and fostering inclusive societal attitudes are essential steps toward creating a more equitable sports environment. By situating the experiences of Turkish female athletes within both national and international frameworks, this study contributes a culturally grounded perspective to the literature on gender and sport.

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Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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