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Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Decision-Making in Career Choice Among Final-Year High School Students in Colombia

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Abstract:

This study investigates the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and decision-making in the professional choice of eleventh grade students in a Colombian city. A quantitative approach with a descriptive cross-sectional design was used to assess decision-making. The Kuder test for career choice, Bar-On emotional intelligence test, and Bechara and Damasio card games were applied to this end. The findings indicated a positive and significant correlation ($p < 0.005$) between EI and career decision making, underscoring the pivotal influence of dimensions such as self-awareness ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), social skills ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$), and general mood ($r = 0.232$, $p < 0.05$). Specifically, heightened self-awareness fosters a more profound comprehension of personal strengths and interests, while augmented social skills and positive moods enhance the capacity for effective interaction and the maintenance of a favorable attitude toward decisions.



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One of the novel contributions of the present study is the absence of previous research using the instruments used here, which highlights its relevance within the field. Likewise, the findings obtained allow us to open a path of reflection on the importance of the phenomenon of professional choice, both in youth and society in general. These results suggest that strengthening EI in students not only improves their professional choice process, but can also reduce academic dropout and increase satisfaction in their future careers.

Keywords: Career choice, emotional intelligence, decision making, vocational guidance, secondary education.

哥伦比亚高中生的情商与职业选择决策之间的关系。

摘要: 本研究调查了哥伦比亚某城市十一年级学生的情商 (EI) 与专业选择决策之间的关系。使用具有描述性横截面设计的定量方法来评估决策。为此应用了库德职业选择测试、Bar-On情商测试以及贝查拉和达马西奥纸牌游戏。研究结果表明, 情商与职业选择决策之间存在显著正相关 ($p < 0.005$), 强调了自我意识 ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$)、社交技能 ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$) 和总体情绪 ($r = 0.232, p < 0.05$) 等维度的关键影响。具体来说, 自我意识的增强可以促进对个人优势和兴趣的更深刻的理解, 而社交技能和积极情绪的增强则可以增强有效互动的能力以及对决策保持有利态度的能力。这些研究结果表明, 提高学生的情商不仅可以优化他们的职业选择过程, 还可以减少学业消耗并提高未来职业的工作满意度。本研究的创新贡献之一是之前没有使用本文所用工具进行的研究, 这凸显了本研究在该领域的相关性。同样, 研究结果也让我们能够反思职业选择现象在青年和整个社会中的重要性。这些结果表明, 加强学生的 EI 不仅可以改善他们的职业选择过程, 还可以减少辍学率并提高他们对未来职业的满意度。

关键词: 职业选择, 情商, 决策, 职业指导, 中等教育。

1. Introduction

The selection of a career path constitutes a substantial challenge for Colombian students at the conclusion of secondary education, engendering internal conflicts and anxiety due to the projection towards an uncertain future and the apprehension of failure [1]. This decision is influenced by social and cultural factors, such as the family environment, occupational expectations, and social pressures, which necessitate profound reflection to circumvent demotivation and academic desertions [2]. Emotional intelligence (EI) has been identified as a pivotal factor in this process, aiding students in recognizing and managing their emotions and comprehending those of others [3]. Furthermore, the decision-making process is foundational, entailing a dynamic interplay between cognitive and physiological domains, where emotions play a pivotal role [4]. This study aimed to examine the influence of EI and decision-

making on students' career selection, with the objective of formulating efficacious educational strategies to bolster this process. The potential benefits of this research include the reduction of uncertainty and stress associated with career choice, which would benefit students and optimize educational resources.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1 About Professional Choice

The selection of a career path by students is associated with their objectives and advancement in both personal and professional domains. This decision is influenced by the factors that motivate individuals to engage toward specific activities. EI competencies in comprehending and regulating emotions are underscored [5], thereby enabling a fulfilling existence in both professional and personal contexts. According to [6], career selection is influenced by four factors: reality (environmental

pressures), educational process, emotional factors, and individual values. Additionally, career choice is regarded as an irreversible process characterized by trade-offs between desires and possibilities. The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for advanced cognitive functions, has been identified as a crucial region for creativity, the execution of complex tasks, formal thinking, social behavior, and decision-making [7]. From a neuropsychological perspective, [8] indicates that the decision-making process involves reward systems that influence future choices to obtain positive outcomes and to avoid negative consequences. Based on an analysis of probabilities and options, this process is rational and conscious.

2.2 About Emotional Intelligence

EI has undergone significant evolution since the early 20th century, ultimately becoming a well-established concept in later decades. It is understood as a practical, social, and personal intelligence that allows reasoning with emotions [9]. The concept of social intelligence was introduced in 1920, and the social component of intelligence was added in 1940. By 1963, the concept of intelligence had evolved to encompass both fluid and crystallized intelligence, with subsequent theories such as multiple intelligences and triarchic theory further expanding the concept to include emotional dimensions in addition to rational ones. Accordingly, EI is defined as the ability to recognize and manage one's own and others' emotions, a capacity that is essential for problem solving, decision-making, and effective relationships [10]. The proposal of five key dimensions of EI—self-knowledge, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills—is necessary to:

Develop skills for personal and relationship management [11]. Specialized authors [12] emphasize the importance of developing emotional competencies through emotional education and providing tools to face daily challenges. EI is recognized as a fundamental element of education, requiring educators to cultivate these skills to enhance teaching effectiveness. Schools serve as essential spaces for socialization, making it imperative to integrate EI into the curriculum to foster self-awareness, self-regulation, and the development of empathetic and assertive interpersonal relationships. This approach assists students in recognizing their potential and enables them to effectively manage their lives.

2.3 About Decision Making

Decision making, a critical component in disciplines such as economics, politics, psychology, and sports, involves the selection of the most suitable option to address problems [15]. There are three predominant models: rational, intuitive, and pragmatic [16]. The rational model is characterized by the systematic evaluation of alternatives, the intuitive model is based on immediate perceptions, and the pragmatic model is informed by experience. In the context of career

selection, a critical aspect of educational programming is the identification of alternatives, anticipation of potential outcomes, and alignment of these alternatives with personal aspirations. This stage is characterized by the necessity of specialized guidance [17]. The interplay between profession and personality is a multifaceted relationship, with certain professions attracting individuals who possess similar characteristics and decision-making styles such as active, passive, impulsive, logical, and emotional. EI is a critical component of psychological well-being and plays a pivotal role in the comprehension and management of emotions, thereby facilitating informed decision making. [18].

2.2 About Career Guidance in the Career Choice Processes

Career guidance is imperative in identifying students' academic, artistic, and athletic aptitudes, interests, and abilities, aiding them in selecting a career that aligns with their aspirations [19]. This process ought to be an inextricable component of education, not an episodic endeavor, and should entail educators assisting students in selecting higher education. Career guidance is frequently regarded as a finalistic process that utilizes psychotechnical assessments to determine suitable careers. However, a more comprehensive approach is necessary that involves continuous interaction between counselors and students, facilitating a thorough analysis of their capabilities and opportunities. Such an approach would also foster a supportive environment for exploration of interests and skills. Career choice is also influenced by emotional and social factors [2], which play a key role in enabling a more conscious and balanced decisions. In addition, [13] underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that includes training in emotional and social skills as well as the development of specific competencies related to students' interests.

3. Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional descriptive design [20] to explore the relationship between EI, decision-making, and career choice in final-year high school students. The selection criteria for the research participants were based on the relevance of these aspects articulated in the final grade of high school. This population was chosen because it is in a crucial stage of transition to higher education or the world of work, where informed decision making is essential. Furthermore, this study examined psychological and cognitive variables, including self-awareness, self-management, and empathy. These variables were assessed using validated instruments to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon.

The research was developed in several key phases, beginning with obtaining informed consent from the

participants, which ensured the protection of their rights and compliance with the ethical procedures necessary for working with human beings [21].

The data collection instruments employed included the Kuder test, Bar-On model of emotional intelligence, and Iowa Gambling Task (IGT). These instruments were selected to assess specific aspects of students' career interests, emotional competencies, and decision-making abilities [22] [23][24].

Following the collection of pertinent information, systematization and analysis of the data obtained were initiated. Employing statistical tools, the data were methodically organized and interpreted, facilitating the identification of patterns and relationships between the variables under study.

The analysis encompassed the implementation of correlation models (Spearman or Pearson) and linear regression, with the objective of evaluating the statistical significance of the results and setting the significance level at $p < 0.005$.

The results obtained were validated or discarded based on the initial hypotheses and documented in detail for subsequent socialization. This process included feedback to the educational community through the presentation of the findings to interdisciplinary groups to generate a positive impact and foster the exchange of knowledge among the different actors involved.

The sample population comprised 100 eleventh-grade students from an educational institution in Palmira, Valle del Cauca, Colombia. The sample was selected by convenience, and inclusion criteria were taken into account, such as being a student enrolled in the eleventh grade and participation in the socialization of the project. Students who did not meet these requirements or who presented with a history of neurological, psychiatric, or developmental disorders were excluded.

Finally, the instruments employed included the Kuder Test, which facilitated the identification of students' career interests within ten specific domains [23]. The Bar-On Model of Emotional Intelligence was also utilized, as it assessed various dimensions of EI, such as self-esteem, empathy, and stress management [22]. Additionally, the Iowa Gambling Task (IGT) was employed to assess students' decision-making abilities and capacity to learn from the consequences of their actions [24].

The collected data were processed and analyzed using SPSS software.

The results obtained provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between EI, decision making, and career choice.

4. Results

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS software, with measures of central tendency, Pearson correlations, and tests of statistical significance

($p < 0.05$). The results are presented below, grouped according to the variables studied, which included self-awareness, self-management, empathy, social skills, adaptability, and their relationship with professional decisions.

4.1 Results according to the studied variables

Self-Awareness and Career Choice

Students with high levels of self-awareness exhibited greater clarity in identifying their interests and strengths. This enabled them to make career choices that were more aligned with their personal aspirations, thereby reducing their likelihood of future dissatisfaction. The correlation between the intrapersonal dimension of the Bar-On model and career choice was positive and significant ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), underscoring the significance of self-awareness in informed career decisions.

Self-Management and Decision-Making

An analysis of self-management, as measured using the Bar-On model, revealed a substantial positive correlation with the capacity to manage stress and anxiety during the career choice process ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$). Students who exhibited high self-management tended to make more balanced and rational decisions, indicating that adequate emotional regulation is imperative for informed career decision making. Emotional regulation has been identified as a critical factor in decision-making.

Empathy and Interpersonal Career Choice.

Empathy, measured using the Bar-On model, was found to be significantly correlated with career preferences for roles that demand continuous human interaction. Specifically, students with high empathy levels ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) were more likely to opt for professions such as psychology, medicine, and social work, which require well-developed interpersonal skills for professional success.

Social Skills and Career Choice

The ability to collaborate in teams and effectively resolve conflicts is crucial for many professions. In this study, social skills demonstrated a significant positive correlation with careers that valued effective communication and group work, such as administration and education ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$).

This underscores the importance of cultivating soft skills in educational programmes to ensure success in collaborative career fields.

Adaptability and Professional Flexibility

Adaptability, as measured by the Iowa Gambling Task (IGT), demonstrated a significant correlation with students' capacity to explore diverse career options and

adapt to changes in the labor market ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$). Students who exhibited higher levels of adaptability were more likely to adjust their career plans in accordance with new opportunities, underscoring the significance of cultivating this skill in addressing emerging career challenges.

Table 1. Correlation of variables (Author's own elaboration)

		Correlations					
		Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Stress Management	Adaptability	General Mood	KUDER Outdoor
Intrapersonal	Pearson Correlation	1	,330**	0,154	,389**	,657**	0,017
	Sig. (bilateral)		0,001	0,127	0,000	0,000	0,869
Interpersonal	Pearson Correlation	,330**	1	0,106	,307**	,359**	0,124
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,001		0,295	0,002	0,000	0,219
Stress Management	Pearson Correlation	0,154	0,106	1	-0,025	0,188	-0,029
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,127	0,295		0,808	0,061	0,771
Adaptability	Pearson Correlation	,389**	,307**	-0,025	1	,432**	0,139
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,000	0,002	0,808		0,000	0,167
General Mood	Pearson Correlation	,657**	,359**	0,188	,432**	1	,232*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,000	0,000	0,061	0,000		0,020
KUDER Outdoor	Pearson Correlation	0,017	0,124	-0,029	0,139	0,232*	1
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,869	0,219	0,771	0,167	0,020	

N=100
 **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).
 *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

4.2 Correlation between the Kuder and Bar-On Instruments

Correlational analyses were performed between the results obtained from the Kuder vocational interest instrument and the dimensions of the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence to explore how emotional competencies influence career choices.

A significant positive correlation was identified between self-awareness and career choice ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$), indicating that students with high self-awareness tended to make more informed decisions aligned with their personal interests. Additionally, self-awareness was significantly correlated with decision making ($r = 0.35, p < 0.05$), suggesting that students with strong self-management skills are better equipped to handle stress effectively, enabling them to make more balanced decisions. A significant positive correlation was also observed between empathy and interpersonal career choices ($r = 0.38, p < 0.01$). Empathy has been linked to preference for professions that require strong interpersonal skills. Furthermore, social skills were positively correlated with career satisfaction ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals with well-developed social abilities are more likely to pursue careers that emphasize teamwork. Finally, the study identified a significant correlation between career flexibility and adaptability ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals with a higher adaptability are more open to exploring new career opportunities.

Table 2. Bar-On Vs Dependent variable: Social service (Author's own elaboration)

		Correlations					
		Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Stress Management	Adaptability	General Mood	Social Service
Intrapersonal	Pearson Correlation	1	,330**	0,154	,389**	,657**	,260**
	Sig. (bilateral)		0,001	0,127	0,000	0,000	0,009
Interpersonal	Pearson Correlation	,330**	1	0,106	,307**	,359**	,738**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,001		0,295	0,002	0,000	0,000
Stress Management	Pearson Correlation	0,154	0,106	1	-0,025	0,188	,256*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,127	0,295		0,808	0,061	0,010
Adaptability	Pearson Correlation	,389**	,307**	-0,025	1	,432**	,208*
	Correlación de Pearson	,657**	,359**	0,188	,432**	1	,329**
General Mood	Sig. (bilateral)	0,000	0,000	0,061	0,000		0,001
	Pearson Correlation	,260**	,738**	,256*	,208*	,329**	1
Social Service	Sig. (bilateral)	0,009	0,000	0,010	0,038	0,001	

N=100
 **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).
 *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

4.3 Correlation Analysis between EI Dimensions and Career Choice

The ensuing discourse presents the findings of a correlation analysis between the dimensions of EI and students' career preferences. Pearson's correlations were used to ascertain the strength and significance of the relationships between the variables.

The General Mood dimension exhibited a significant correlation with interest in outdoor activities ($r = 0.232, p = 0.020$), suggesting that a positive mood may influence an individual's inclination toward outdoor activities. The other dimensions (intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, and adaptability) did not show significant correlations. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a strong correlation between the General Mood dimension and preference for social service-oriented careers ($r = 0.738, p < 0.001$), indicating that a positive mood may play a crucial role in individuals' decisions to pursue careers in the social service sector. Preference for working in an office environment demonstrated a strong correlation with self-awareness ($r = 0.888, p < 0.001$). Additionally, General Mood ($r = 0.593, p < 0.001$) and adaptability ($r = 0.362, p < 0.001$) were significantly correlated, suggesting that individuals with heightened self-awareness and positive mood are more inclined toward office-based work settings. Furthermore, the findings underscore the pivotal role of EI dimensions in professional decision making and career selection. Interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and adaptability are crucial determinants of students' ability to make informed and satisfactory decisions regarding their professional future. Furthermore, integrating emotional intelligence development programs into educational

settings could significantly enhance students' decision-making processes and better prepare them for the challenges of the professional world.

Table 3. Bar-On Vs Dependent variable
(Author's own elaboration)

		Correlations					
		Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Stress Management	Adaptability	General Mood	Office
Intrapersonal	Pearson Correlation	1	,330**	0,154	,389**	,657**	,888**
	Sig. (bilateral)		0,001	0,127	0,000	0,000	0,000
Interpersonal	Pearson Correlation	,330**	1	0,106	,307**	,359**	,202*
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,001		0,295	0,002	0,000	0,044
Stress Management	Pearson Correlation	0,154	0,106	1	-0,025	0,188	0,140
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,127	0,295		0,808	0,061	0,164
Adaptability	Pearson Correlation	,389**	,307**	-0,025	1	,432**	,362**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,000	0,002	0,808		0,000	0,000
General Mood	Pearson Correlation	,657**	,359**	0,188	,432**	1	,593**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0,000	0,000	0,061	0,000		0,000
Office	Pearson Correlation	,888**	,202*	0,140	,362**	,593**	1
	Sig. (bilateral)						

N=100

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicated a significant association between emotional intelligence (EI) and the career decision-making process of eleventh-grade students. The development of emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, empathy, social skills, and adaptability, has been shown to facilitate informed and satisfactory career choices.

Students exhibiting high levels of self-awareness demonstrate greater clarity in their career decisions and select professional paths aligned with their personal interests and intrinsic strengths [10]. This heightened self-awareness is crucial for choosing a career congruent with one's aptitudes, thereby mitigating the risk of professional dissatisfaction.

Regarding self-management, students possessing this competence exhibited greater ability to regulate the stress associated with career decision-making, which resulted in more balanced and deliberate choices [23]. This ability enables individuals to maintain their focus and make rational decisions despite the uncertainties in the vocational landscape.

Empathy, defined as the capacity to understand and share the emotions of others, has emerged as a significant predictor of career preference. Students with high levels of empathy demonstrated a marked inclination toward professions within the social sciences and healthcare sectors, where interpersonal skills are fundamental [9]. Careers, such as psychology, nursing, and social work, demand a profound capacity for emotional understanding, making them particularly attractive to individuals with strong empathetic abilities.

Likewise, students with well-developed social skills exhibit a preference for careers in management and education, and fields in which continuous interpersonal interaction and effective communication are essential [25]. These competencies not only influence career selection, but also contribute to long-term professional success.

Moreover, adaptability was identified as a key factor in broadening students' career considerations and facilitating their adjustment to the evolving demands of the labor market [26]. This flexibility is particularly advantageous for navigating professional transitions and overcoming career-related challenges.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that an individual's general mood influences their preference for outdoor activities, highlighting the relevance of emotional well-being in the exploration of career options, particularly in professions associated with nature. By contrast, interpersonal skills exhibited a moderate yet significant impact on students' interest in numerical and scientific activities, emphasizing the necessity of vocational guidance programs that integrate both emotional and academic competencies [27].

Furthermore, all dimensions of EI displayed positive correlations with a propensity for social services, underscoring the importance of interpersonal skills in fostering community engagement. Finally, the findings suggest that self-awareness, mood regulation, and adaptability significantly influence students' preferences for office-based work environments, reinforcing the critical role of emotional attributes in career adjustment and workplace integration.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role of emotional intelligence (EI) in shaping students' career decision-making process. The development of emotional competencies not only influences career choice, but also enhances students' ability to navigate the complexities of the modern labor market. Individuals with heightened self-awareness and effective self-regulation are more likely to make intentional career decisions aligned with their intrinsic strengths, personal values, and long-term aspirations.

Empathy and social skills have emerged as key determinants in selecting professions that require significant interpersonal engagement, such as those in the social sciences and healthcare sectors. Likewise, flexibility and adaptability are essential traits that enable students to respond proactively to the dynamic and often unpredictable demands of the labor market. The observed correlation between mood and preference for outdoor activities underscores the influence of emotional well-being on student engagement in career exploration. Similarly, the association between interpersonal skills and interest in scientific disciplines emphasizes the need to integrate

emotional development into academic and vocational guidance. In light of these findings, it is imperative that educational institutions embed EI development within their career counseling frameworks.

This includes the training of guidance personnel, use of validated psychometric tools to assess emotional competencies, and design of targeted interventions. Additionally, involving families, peer networks, and broader social contexts can further support a holistic approach to career development and help to buffer against negative influences. Overall, emotional intelligence stands out as a foundational factor in facilitating informed, purposeful, and satisfying career choices. Integrating EI education into broader curricular and extracurricular initiatives can empower students to pursue careers that not only reflect their personal strengths, but also promote long-term professional success and psychological well-being.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships between emotional intelligence and career decision making. Second, the sample was confined to final-year high school students in selected regions of Colombia, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Third, reliance on self-reported measures may have introduced response bias, including social desirability effects. Finally, emotional intelligence was assessed as a global construct, without disaggregating specific dimensions that may influence different aspects of career choice behavior.

Practical Implications

These results underscore the importance of integrating emotional intelligence development into high school curricula, particularly within career guidance programs. Educators and counselors should receive specialized training to help students enhance their self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, all of which contribute to more effective career decision making. Schools can also implement structured workshops, mentoring programs, and experiential learning opportunities to strengthen their students' emotional and social competencies in real-life contexts.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the psychological determinants of career decision making by empirically linking emotional intelligence to vocational behavior in a Latin American context. This expands the theoretical understanding of how emotional competencies interact with cognitive and motivational factors in shaping career trajectories, particularly among adolescents at a critical life stage. Furthermore, it highlights mood states and social-emotional skills as potential mediators of the relationship between emotional intelligence and occupational preferences.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to explore how emotional intelligence evolves over time and its long-term impact on career outcomes. Comparative analyses across different countries and cultural settings could provide a broader perspective on the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, experimental research involving interventions to enhance EI could offer insights into causal mechanisms and programme effectiveness. Further exploration of gender, socioeconomic status, and parental influence as moderating variables would also enrich our understanding of individual differences in career decision-making processes.

Recommendations for Educational Managers and Policymakers

Educational leaders and policymakers should prioritize emotional development as a core component of secondary education. Investment in counselor training, validated assessment tools, and EI-based pedagogical models can significantly enhance students' preparedness for career decision making. Partnerships with universities, employers, and community organizations can help bridge the gap between emotional skill development and career expectations. Policymakers are also encouraged to support national strategies that promote psychological well-being and emotional literacy as foundations of youth employability and life satisfaction.

Declarations

Author Contributions

All authors have contributed to the article structure. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Universidad Santiago de Cali.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double

publication and/or submission, and redundancies, have been completely observed by the authors.

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