




Body image satisfaction in female Psychology students

Satisfacción de la imagen corporal en estudiantes mujeres de Psicología

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RESUMEN

Introducción: La cultura establece implícita o explícitamente un estereotipo de imagen corporal. Desde una visión occidental, ésta promueve la belleza del cuerpo como objeto para alcanzar el éxito social. Los jóvenes universitarios en su afán de alcanzar el ideal estético, en algunos casos se ven involucrados en trastornos de la conducta alimentaria, distorsión de su imagen corporal y conductas depresivas. Situaciones que repercuten en su comportamiento y accionar como futuros profesionales. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo realizar una evaluación de la imagen corporal de los estudiantes mujeres de la Facultad de Psicología de la Universidad de Cuenca-Ecuador y, además identificar posibles trastornos alimentarios.

Metodología: Se evaluaron 288 estudiantes de sexo femenino de 18 a 22 años de edad, de la Facultad de Psicología de la Universidad de Cuenca-Ecuador a quienes se aplicó el Cuestionario de Figura Corporal (BSQ). El enfoque empleado fue cuantitativo de diseño exploratorio descriptivo, con un muestreo aleatorio.

Resultados: Se reporta que el 17.01% de todos los estudiantes universitarios que participaron en esta investigación, tienen un alto riesgo de sufrir un trastorno alimentario. De acuerdo al Cuestionario de la Figura Corporal al obtener más de 105 puntos, se considera un estado patológico. Por otro lado, el 83% de los investigados se encuentran en el rango no patológico.

Conclusión: Los resultados indican que en los primeros ciclos de estudio se encuentran la mayor cantidad de casos patológicos, siendo un grupo insatisfecho con su imagen corporal.

Palabras Clave: Estudiante universitario; percepción; belleza; apariencia física; trastornos de conducta alimentaria.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Culture implicitly or explicitly establishes a body image stereotype. A western perspective, promotes the beauty of the body as an object to achieve social success. Young university students in their quest to achieve the ideal aesthetic, in some cases get involved into eating disorders, distortion of their body image and depressive behaviors. Situations that affect their behavior and performance as future professionals. This research aims to carrying out an assessment of the body image of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Cuenca-Ecuador female students, and moreover, identifying possible eating disorders.

Methodology: 288 female students between 18 and 22 years old, from the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Cuenca-Ecuador to whom the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) was applied. The used approach was quantitative with a descriptive exploratory design and a random sampling.

Results: It is reported that 17.01% of all college students who participated in this research are at high risk for an eating disorder. According to the Body Shape Questionnaire, obtaining more than 105 points is considered a pathological state. On the other hand, 83% of those researched are in the non-pathological range.

Conclusion: The results indicate that the largest number of pathological cases is located in the first studying cycles, being a group dissatisfied with their body image.

Keywords: University student; perception; beauty; physical appearance; eating disorders.

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INTRODUCTION

For Rivarola MF. (2003)¹ and Botella L, et al. (2008)², body image is the mental representation of the body, this is shaped during childhood and it is in adolescence where it is important for the psychosocial development of the individual basically in three aspects: feelings, thoughts and actions assumed by the individual, according to the perception they have about their own body, mainly about their appearance. It is a fundamental element in psychosocial adaptation and in the development of self-esteem³⁻⁵.

Following this line, Raich RM. (2000) defines body image as a complex construct, which includes both the perception of the whole body and its parts, as well as its movement and limits, the subjective experience of attitudes, thoughts, feelings and evaluations, as well as the behaviors derived from the cognitions and feelings they experience⁶. Therefore, body image can be understood as a multidimensional construct in continuous change and interaction and it contains three fundamental components: the global perception of the whole body and each of its parts, satisfaction with body image, and behavioral consequences⁷.

Nevertheless, Salaberria K, et al. (2007) differentiate physical appearance from body image, defining physical appearance as the result of social interaction, and body image as the result of the mental representation that exists regarding that appearance, being the way in which an individual perceives, imagines, feels and acts respect to his or her own body⁸.

According to the studied literature, in recent years society has given an excessive value to body image, creating subcultures based on the perception of an ideal image, highlighting beauty and generating concern in the appearance especially of youths^{4, 9, 10}. During adolescence, the body figure is subject to notable changes and modifications that require the teenage to continuously restructure the image of his or her own body, increasing body dissatisfaction, which is why it is a stage of greater risk for the development of food disorders. In this way, the carried-out research shows that, in adolescence, thinness is associated with a socially positive assessment being a symbol of beauty and success, while fat implies feelings associated with failure and is loaded with negative connotations^{11, 12}. This is why, an excessive consumerism by slimming products is generated in young people and others start severe and unhealthy diets, exposing themselves to behaviors that represent a risk to their health¹³.

The greatest danger that body image dissatisfaction involves is the consequent weight control, using inappropriate and unhealthy methods, a situation that is much more frequent in the case of women^{5, 14-16}.

On the other hand, for Baile JI, et al. (1999) the fundamental thing is not only to verify that adolescents use wrong

ways of thinking in relation to the perception they have about their image, but that, from these self-perceptions, concrete thoughts are derived that pass to be values in his life and that produce an attitude of change when trying to be like the stereotyped model that prevails in the ideal of society¹⁷. In this sense, Ballester R, et al. (2003) observed that having to adjust to certain standards of homogenized beauty in the social environment, leads people to a continuous body evaluation state¹⁸.

In this way, the aesthetic model has been transformed into a social construction that varies in each culture and the sociocultural factors, that prevail in each of these cultures will influence the perceptions of the body itself, causing dissatisfaction, which causes distortions in the individuals' body image and can also generate risk behaviors and physical and psychological illnesses that endanger health seriously^{18, 19}. Thus, the interest in achieving an ideal model of thinness or a "perfect body" due to the social stigma it represents (beauty, freedom, control over oneself and success), can affect the well-being especially of women, particularly to the youngest.

As Merino H, et al. (2001) state, the culture of thinness in which we are currently immersed has established a body stereotype capable of triggering a series of values and norms that determine behaviors related to height, weight and the body figure, behavior that, in the long run, will lead to the presence of an eating problem or disorder²⁰.

Complementary to the importance that culture exerts on the body image, Carrillo MV. et al. (2011) also consider that the globalization of "audiovisual culture" reveals the influence exerted by the media, as powerful transmitters of values that promote the lack of well-being in youth and that exert a strong impact on their social, emotional and cognitive development²¹.

According to Guadarrama-Guadarrama R, et al. (2018)³, Salazar S. (2008)¹² and Pérez JC. (2003)²², the media influence body image differently in women and men. Women -especially teenagers- evaluate their appearance negatively and are more critical of their bodies, they tend to value slimness, wide hips, long and firm legs, tanned skin, large breasts, a narrow waist and a toned body; while men value weight gain, a broad back and firm muscles, due to the fact that they process faster and more information from the media. This type of messages about the body and appearance, especially in women, are a reinforcing stimulus to the system of socially accepted norms towards what a woman should or should not physically possess²³.

The influence of the media on body image has been extensively studied. Toro J, et al. (1988) concluded, after analyzing the "pro-slim" advertising of ten magazines aimed at the female audience, that one of four advertisements directly or indirectly promoted people to lose weight²⁴. Other researchers have detected the influence of the media and social agents in the diffusion of an ideal slim aesthetic, where cinema, music, fashion, television and advertisements of all kinds, influence the body aesthetics of

women²⁴⁻²⁶. In this line, current research such as that of Brea AL. (2019) in which she conducted a systematic review of the literature, identified the negative influence of the social network Instagram in relation to body image; she concluded that active users identify themselves and are visually dragged, by influencers with the intention of looking like them, satisfying certain habits and emotional states²⁷.

In view of this situation, Barrón-Colín M, et al. (2021) explain that one of the properties of the various social networks lies in their ability to be perceived in different ways by users; according to the authors, Facebook and Instagram are considered to be the most harmful to mental health²⁸. Thus, the use of social platforms has an evidently emotional effect on people, for example: generating in them a great empathy and trust with their followers, or on the contrary, causing feelings of frustration or depression when they are unable to resemble the person they want to imitate²⁸. For Fuentes V, et al. (2017) the abuse and addiction to social networks would be contemplated in three fundamental variables: a) ease of access to the product, b) the understanding and tolerant environment before this reality and c) the subject's factors that favor dependence²⁹.

In this respect, the canons of thinness and the established forms by society determine who is beautiful and who is not, and the media are responsible for spreading it. For their part, Jardí MS, et al. (2003)³⁰ and García-Ochoa YC. (2010)³¹ point out that the standards perceived as attractive, respond to mercantilist criteria, totally removed from health and well-being, clearly using persuasive and seductive advertising speeches that, use appreciated and accepted models by society.

For Esnaola I. (2005) the state of pleasure, success, friendships, etc., are conditioned, to a large extent, by physical attractiveness, since those who possess it have a greater chance of finding work and with the desired social acceptance³².

In accordance with the above, it appears that the media play an important role in promoting a slim body aesthetic model. Stice E, et al. (1994) in an investigation with 238 university students, who were exposed to a series of advertisements that promote extreme body thinness as an ideal, determined a significant increase in their body dissatisfaction; a direct relationship was also found between exposure to the media and the presence of food symptoms³³. This last part coincides with what is stated by Vázquez R, et al. (2000) who mention that advertising has a greater effect on people with eating disorders³⁴. It should be noted that the harmful role of the media is related to certain programs, in which music videos or sports programs prevail, which show slender figures.

Moreno ME. (1999) determined the consequences of social pressure, showing on the one hand that 93% of women show attraction to physical appearance, and on the other hand, that 95% believe they have more body volume than they really have and their dissatisfaction with it; one of the hypotheses that would explain these data would be the impact of the body aesthetic model in Western culture, the veneration of slimness and the stigmatization of obesity³⁵. Vandereycken W, et al. (1985) named this phenomenon as the "culture of thinness", which, should be emphasized, exists in only certain societies³⁶.

Then, it could be said that the experiences that build body image are multifactorial, which makes specific interventions difficult from clinical and educational treatment. According to the reviewed literature, there are several indicators that influence body dissatisfaction, among these are: age, sex, race/ethnicity, body composition and physical activity^{37, 38}.

Obviously, the female beauty stereotypes that prevail today are different from those that existed 100 or 200 years ago, but these sociocultural factors, added to psychological, interpersonal and biological factors, are predisposing risk for the appearance of an eating disorder behavior, especially sociocultural factors. Thinness, which sometimes is extreme, is a symbol of perseverance, success, self-control and total beauty; while fat is translated into lack of care, low self-control and neglect³⁹.

These eating disorders represent high-risk conditions, especially for young women and adolescents. In this population, there has been an increase of two to five times within the prevalence figures in the last three decades, with a percentage of 0.5-1% in anorexia nervosa, 1-3% in bulimia nervosa and approximately 3% in unspecified eating disorders. According to the American Psychiatric Association and based on recent reviews of epidemiological studies, a prevalence from one to nine is established in men compared to women⁴⁰. On the other hand, Craven MP, et al. (2019)⁴¹ and Zhang L, et al. (2018)⁴² reveal that: shame and guilt for binge-eating as a means of emotional coping, dieting, unscientific physical activity, etc., they could be generators of eating disorders in university students.

Moreover, it is important to mention that different studies agree that the highest prevalence of body image disorders is reflected in women. However, this does not mean that this condition does not exist in men, as shown by the study conducted in Mexico by Unikel C, et al. (2002), where they mention that in men a marked tendency to desire a much more corpulent body and to maintain some risky behaviors such as excessive exercise and compulsive eating tends to prevail⁴³. Likewise, Cruz RM, et al. (2008) in a study conducted with Mexican university adolescents concluded that men show greater symptoms of eating disorders, body dissatisfaction and risky eating behaviors in contrast to women⁴⁴. In this sense, Vázquez R, et al. (2005) reported that men perform excessive physical exercise, while women perform very restrictive, rigid diets or opt for fasting⁴⁵.

In this order of ideas, it has been found that men generally do not tend to make explicit their desire to stay thinner⁴⁶. Furthermore, the fact that women report greater dissatisfaction, with their body image has raised the question of whether current instruments adequately detect body image dissatisfaction in men⁴⁷. Finally, although the importance given to body image by the male population is relatively low, some studies indicate that a high proportion of men would at least present risky eating behaviors⁴⁸.

If in addition to all above, we add that the moment when young people must enter university, we see that they have to adapt to new routines, psychosocial changes and academic and social demands in order to their professional preparation^{39, 49, 50}. University students face a substantial change in their lifestyle, which has a great impact on their nutritional health, because spending more time away from home, greater independence is obtained and relationships are formed away from the family nucleus, which brings (in many cases), the change in eating habits

and routines that were maintained at home, which can cause eating disorders⁵¹. In addition to this, Kim T-Y. (2017) comments that university students would be affected by cultural environments, being exposed to advertising, social networks, current fashions, social, school, sometimes work or family pressure, which can trigger affective disorders that they also give way to an eating behavior disorder⁵². That is why Martínez D, et al. (2007) consider that having a high body satisfaction will reduce the risk of suffering from pathologies in eating behavior³⁸.

Due to the importance of an adequate perception of body image in university students, the present study focuses on carrying out an assessment of the body image of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Cuenca-Ecuador students female, and moreover, identifying possible eating disorders through the application of the body figure questionnaire of Castrillón Moreno, Luna Montaña, Avendaño Prieto and Pérez-Acosta.

METHODOLOGY

Study Population

This research started with 620 students between 18 and 22 years old, corresponding to all students of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Cuenca, in the Azuay province - Ecuador. It was a quantitative, exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional study that allowed an assessment of the body image of the students of the Faculty of Psychology.

Sampling and Sample

A probability sampling was carried out through the software "STATS"; A representative sample of 237 participants was established with a margin of error of 5%. However, the taken sample included 288 female students only, because the structure of the instrument is not applicable for males (Mage=18.66 years, SDage=0.729 years with a height of 1.55m [SD=7.21m] and a weight of 53.87kg [SD=3.93kg]). The selected sample included students from the first to the seventh cycle of the Career of Psychology.

The following inclusion criteria were considered: to be legally enrolled in any cycle of the psychology program at the University of Cuenca, not to present obesity and finally freely and voluntarily consent to participate in the study. On the other hand, those who did not meet these criteria were excluded.

Instrument for the Collection of Information

The evaluation instrument used was the Body Shape Questionnaire validated by Castrillón D, et al. (2007)⁵³ in the Colombian population, whose original version is the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) by Cooper PJ, et al. (1987)⁵⁴. The used questionnaire has a Cronbach's alpha=0.96 with a 95% confidence interval. It has been designed to measure concern in female populations, regarding; the perception of their weight and body image, the dissatisfaction produced by their own body, the fear of gaining weight, the self-devaluation of their physical appearance, the desire to lose weight, and the avoidance of situa-

tions in which their physical appearance can attract attention. In addition, it assesses the dissatisfaction of eating disorders and discriminates the clinical population from the normal population.

The questionnaire can be applied to youth and adult women, but it should not be used in people with obesity. It is an instrument that can be self-administered, containing 34 closed questions according to a Likert-type frequency scale of 1-6 degrees that varies from never to always: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=almost always and 6=always. Among these questions are: Didn't I attend "rumbas" or social gatherings because I felt bad about my figure? Have I felt so bad in relation to my body figure that, I had to scream or cry? The fact of eating even small quantities of food, made me feel fat? I feel that it is not fair that other women are thinner than me? and others.

The instrument used allows an overall score to be obtained, which evaluates two factors: body dissatisfaction and concern about weight. Scores range between 34 and 204 points, deriving 4 subscales (0-34 is absent, 35-104 occasional, 105-133 frequent, 134-204 constant) in relation to positive or negative thinking about body image, which allow defining the people without problem or concerned about their body image of people who are at risk of suffering from an eating disorder.

The application time ranges from 10-20 minutes and is completed as, the statement adjusts to the reality of the person about, their body satisfaction during the last 4 weeks.

For the correction, all the points are added, resulting in a minimum score of 34 and a maximum of 204. If the score exceeds 105 points, there could be some indication that the person evaluated could be having some concern about their body image.

Then again, a digital scale (CAMRY Body Fat/Hydration Monitor Scale/EF906), periodically calibrated by the researchers, was used to determine the weight in kg of the participants. A portable stadiometer with an integrated leveler (seca 213) was used to establish the height of the students, and finally the Body Mass Index was calculated for each of them, with a mean of 22.41 kg and a SD=2.11 kg.

Information Collection Procedure

The study was developed in three stages: at first, a pilot test was carried out in another educational institution in the city, to 45 female students who showed similar characteristics to the study population. This allowed to denote the validity of the tool that contemplated a Cronbach Alpha of 0.84. Such assessments were subject to a 95.5% confidence level for the total of the items that made up the scale. In a second stage, the respective authorizations were requested from the authorities of the institution to take height and weight measurements of the participants, in order to establish the Body Mass Index (BMI) [weight (kg)/height (m)²]. Data that allowed aligning with the inclusion criteria, based on the parameters of Montero P, et al. (2004)⁵⁵, thinness, less than 20 kg/m²; normality, between 20 and 24.99 kg/m²; overweight from 25 to 29.99 kg/m² and obesity, equal to or greater than 30 kg/m², after which the Body Shape Questionnaire was applied to those who were not overweight. Finally, for the third step, the study complied with the ethical recommendations in

research in human beings, established in the Declaration of Helsinki and by the World Medical Association of 2014, based on the signing of the informed consents of the students and informing that the data and results of the survey would be used only for research purposes. Likewise, the participants were informed at all times that their cooperation would be voluntary, confidential and that they could withdraw whenever they consider⁵⁶.

Data Analysis Procedure

The obtained information was processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 software, which made descriptive statistical analyzes and get representative tables around the proposed objective.

RESULTS

After applying the body figure questionnaire to 288 Psychology students from the Cuenca-Ecuador University, **Table 1** shows that, in the first three study cycles of the degree, 49 students present distortions regarding the perception of their body. It is important to mention that, when filling out the survey, the students were asked to answer the sociodemographic data by placing the lower cycle they were studying, since there were some cases in which, the fifth and sixth cycle students were taking subjects from first to third cycle, that is why their number decreases in the higher cycles.

Regarding the age of the studied group, in **Table 2** 17.01% present a distortion of their body image (dysmorphia), observing that the greatest number of pathological cases are frequent in the ages of 18 to 19 years. These students should be considered for intervention work in order to balance their perception of the body, as they will be the future mental health professionals. On the other hand, it is important to consider that as students go through the higher cycles of the career, their perception of the body seems to change, since the percentage of pathological student's decreases.

Table 3 presents a general summary of the group investigated by the subscales of the body shape questionnaire, where 82.99% of the students do not present pathology, having scored between 35 to 104, which according to López AM, et al. (2008), would be subjects who have occasional thoughts linked to the achievement of a socially established body ideal and which has repercussions in a normal or moderate concern about their body image⁵⁷. However, students who scored between 105 and 133 and between 134 and 204, whose sum of percentages represents 17.01% show a pathological state, with frequent and constant thoughts of anguish and negativity in relation to their body image, focusing their thoughts on how to lose weight, which allows us to presume, according to the scale, that they are students who present eating disorders.

DISCUSSION

This work determines the assessment of body image and its link to possible eating disorders in female psychology students. The results obtained from the Body Shape Questionnaire

Table 1. Frequency of pathological and non-pathological cases by cycle of Psychology students

State	Cycles							Total students
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Pathological	18	12	12	5	2	0	0	49
Non-pathological	30	71	91	25	14	3	5	239
Total students	48	83	103	30	16	3	5	288

Table 2. Pathological and non-pathological cases according to the age of the students.

State	Age							
	18 years		19 years		20 years		21 years	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Pathological	30	10.42	17	5.9	2	0.69	0	0
Non-pathological	101	35.1	116	40.27	17	5.9	5	1.73

Table 3. Total summary by subscales: pathological and non-pathological cases.

Subscales	n	%	State
0- 34 points (absence of body dissatisfaction)	0	0	No Pathological
35-104 points (Occasional body dissatisfaction and concern about with weight)	239	82.99	
105-133 points (Frequent body dissatisfaction and worry about with weight.)	28	9.72	Pathological
134-204 points (Constant body dissatisfaction and worry about with weight)	21	7.29	

showed that 17.01% of all university students have a high risk of suffering from an eating disorder, because their score was higher than 105 points, considering it as a pathological state according to the scale of the questionnaire. According to Castrillón DA, et al. (2017), high scores would determine a distortion of the body image and could also present an eating disorder because with the desire to maintain a socially acceptable figure the subject would stop eating certain foods⁵³. On the other hand, 83% prove to be satisfied with their body according to non-pathological information. Due to this situation, it can be mentioned that the students are totally satisfied with their body.

In the Body Shape Questionnaire subscale, 49 are in the range of 105 to 2004 points, which caught the attention of the Psychology students, since this would show that they disagree with their body. These results are similar to those presented by other authors Merino H, et al. (2001)²⁰ and Sánchez-Villegas A, et al. (2001)⁵⁸, the same ones that support the theory about the greater social pressure to which the female population is exposed.

On the other hand, the aforementioned results are similar to those presented by Luna I. (2001) who states that body dissatisfaction is highly influenced by social pressures, due to cultural beauty standards that generate erroneous ideas of what social

acceptance means especially in adolescence, trying to be more attractive when finding a partner or to improve existing relationships⁵⁹. In turn, the results are also contrasted with current stereotypes of beauty, which are disseminated by the media and especially by social networks, where body image has become a paradigm of visual sales. Faced with this situation, a low percentage of university students can acquire this adoption of information, possibly creating or accepting obsessive behaviors that in the future damage their physical and mental health.

In the same way, in a minority group of surveyed students, especially from the first cycles of the Psychology career, the influence that frequent aesthetic advertising has on them is evidenced, enhanced by cultural standards of beauty, through sociocultural marketing globalized elements that coincide with those proposed by Bastos IL, et al. (2020)⁶⁰. From this point on, female beauty is essential in the sense of creating self-confidence, feeling good, valuing, loving and being motivated.

The greatest difficulty found based on the results deceits in the fact that the students use the aesthetic information from, prejudices or beliefs of the body image, marked by society in an exaggerated or erroneous way, showing the feeling of anguish and negativity for their body, For example: trying to maintain a beautiful, shiny and perfect face (linked to a condition of self-confidence and devalued self-esteem); by the social fashion that increasingly internalizes in women, the idea of a slim body, wide hips, flat stomach and pronounced breasts, coming to assume certain lifestyles marked by diets, surgeries, fitness life tutorials and dressing ways, triggering in extreme cases, anorexia and bulimia diseases, coinciding with the ideas of Castelao-Naval O, et al. (2019)⁶¹. This type of adoption of certain behaviors, from any analysis, is not healthy, since excesses and all these manifestations can cause frustration, regret and serious consequences for the well-being of people. In conclusion, the above-mentioned shows influential situations that should not go unnoticed, since students, as future psychologists, must strive for an emotional, coherent and conscious balance in the face of situations in their context.

This exploratory and descriptive study attempted to know and describe the population, so no inferences were made. The scale makes it difficult to apply to men. Therefore, it is important to consider other variables such as anxiety and personality of the participants and to expand the sample with male students.

In summary, the researchers conclude that most of the university students of the Psychology career agree with their body image, while the minority perceive a distorted idea of their body, due to social factors that stereotype how a person should be physically and that they impose beauty canons through the media. In this sense, strategies should be considered to improve the ideological conception presented by students who do not accept their body image, since they, when assuming their role as professionals in psychology, must be psychologically and emotionally stable, to guide and improve the conflicts that present their consultants, avoiding at all times projecting their personal situation.

We also consider that it is important that the investigation could be extended, in order to know and guide, if needed, a positive and adequate perception of the body image that helps to improve the emotional state of the population in general.

Finally, we determined that the models imposed by fashion and industry reflect the values of the society that produces them, making them a social and economic "success", creating the false need to achieve an ideal body to feel integrated, coaxing many people to follow harmful diets. Even so, it is difficult to clearly relate advertising and eating disorders, since there is no direct relationship but there is a manifest influence. The problem arises from the difficulty for women to identify with images offered of them from advertising and at the same time, their frustration at not being able to resemble the advertised model. The commercial ads propose a unique beauty prototype, turning bodies into products adapted to the needs of the industry.

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CONFLICTOS DE INTERÉS

Los autores declaran que no tienen conflictos de interés.