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INFLUENCE OF SOFT SKILLS ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AS A MEDIATING MECHANISM

Abstract

Performance appraisal plays a crucial mediating role in the complex interaction between soft skills and career development. This practice provides a comprehensive view of workers' competencies and directly influences their professional trajectories. This investigation checked the significance of these competencies in career development, employing performance appraisal as a mediating mechanism. The sample comprised 262 employees in Portugal. Data were collected from a convenience sample using the snowball sampling method, in which participants were asked to invite their contacts to participate in the study. The questionnaire included the short skills inventory, the career growth scale, and the performance management scale. The more developed the soft skills, the greater the tendency for employees to progress in their careers. Performance appraisal has a significant influence on employees' career trajectories, as the possibility of career advancement largely depends on their performance. The data further revealed that by mediating the relationship between soft skills and career progression, performance appraisal helps guide and support the organization's strategic decisions. However, when the mediating variable is introduced into the model, the influence of soft skills on career development is no longer significant, indicating a full mediation effect. The results suggest that 26.8% of the possibility of progressing in the career is explained by the performance appraisal results. These results act as a critical link between soft skills and career development. Soft skills exert a significant influence on career development, and performance appraisal emerges as a valuable means to recognize and promote these competencies.

Keywords soft skills, career development, performance appraisal, workplace context, mediation model

JEL Classification J24, M53, O15

INTRODUCTION

The crucial role of soft skills in an individual's career development has been widely acknowledged, highlighting the need for periodic assessment (Ramirez-Vielma & Nazar, 2019). These cross-cutting competencies are essential in any work environment, and they facilitate communication, teamwork, problem-solving, flexibility, stress management, and the demonstration of leadership abilities (Guerra-Báez, 2019). However, a central issue that arises is whether soft skills are being assessed adequately and fairly within organizations and how these assessment processes affect the professional development of employees. According to Vuong et al. (2020), when soft skills are correctly evaluated, the results provide workers with valuable insights into their behavioral competencies and identify areas requiring improvement. However, it remains unclear to what extent performance appraisal effectively influences opportunities for career development and progression (Stewart & Brown, 2020).



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Given the potential impact of performance appraisal on employees' career trajectories, it is imperative that organizations establish clear, measurable, and relevant criteria for the competencies being evaluated. A lack of clarity in evaluation criteria and the absence of specific feedback can hinder personal growth and limit career advancement opportunities for employees (Dangol, 2021). Consequently, there is a need to investigate whether organizations are implementing evaluation practices that effectively promote the development of soft skills and how these practices can be optimized to ensure that appraisals contribute positively to professional growth and career progression.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Globalization is altering the dynamics of the job market, making it more volatile, uncertain, competitive, and ambiguous (VUCA) (Damoah et al., 2021). In response to market demands, organizations need professionals who commit to organizational goals and implement changes that contribute to gaining a competitive advantage (England et al., 2020).

Technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient to secure a prominent position, and organizations are increasingly seeking professionals who demonstrate attitudes, skills, and behaviors that set them apart (Short & Keller-Bell, 2021). These competencies, commonly referred to as soft skills, are crucial for organizational success and play a decisive role in the selection of one candidate over another (Eva & Afroze, 2021).

In the era of digital transformation, soft skills are increasingly valued. As automation and artificial intelligence take over routine tasks, unique human skills such as creativity, empathy, and critical thinking become significant differentiators (Poláková et al., 2023). Therefore, while hard skills ensure technical competence, soft skills drive leadership, productivity, and resilience, which are crucial for success in an ever-evolving business world (Rodrigues, 2021).

The ongoing transformations in the current workplace environment and the emergence of new organizational structures have significantly impacted how work is perceived (Straub et al., 2020). These changes are also reflected in the concept of career, which has shifted its focus from easily measurable factors (e.g., promotions, salaries) to valuing learning in the context of work and identification with tasks performed (Bocciardi et al., 2017).

Career development involves both vertical and horizontal movements, providing opportunities for growth and professional expansion. These movements are fundamental strategies for advancing an individual's professional trajectory. Vertical movements refer to advancements within the organizational hierarchy, which may include promotions to positions of greater responsibility (Rodrigues et al., 2019). These movements offer the opportunity to lead teams, manage more complex projects, and make strategic decisions (Nardes et al., 2020). Vertical movements are often associated with the desire to progress in one's career, gain recognition, and increase remuneration (Infante-Perea et al., 2021). On the other hand, horizontal movements involve lateral changes within the organization or between different organizations (Kost et al., 2020). This may include transitioning to a different department, shifting to a role that requires a different set of skills, or even exploring distinct sectors. Horizontal movements are valuable for expanding experience, acquiring new competencies, and diversifying knowledge (Nienaber et al., 2020). Although there may not be an immediate hierarchical advancement, horizontal movements often contribute to more comprehensive professional development (S. Kremen & F. Kremen, 2020). The most effective career development integrates both approaches. This hybrid strategy can result in a more robust and adaptable professional profile (Hong et al., 2022), offering continuous opportunities for learning, growth, and job satisfaction (Kharadze et al., 2022).

Cross-cutting competencies significantly contribute to career management as they not only account for it but also reflect decisions related to its development (Tripathy, 2020). Loyarte-López et al. (2020) argue that career development involves some flexibility and adaptability to the professional context, with soft skills being refined and shaped to the transformations occurring in the organizational setting.

Therefore, it is important to develop analytical skills that allow individuals to assess various options and make informed decisions (Robertson et al., 2020).

Adaptability also holds a significant place during the career development process, as organizations increasingly consist of multidisciplinary workgroups. Thus, it is crucial to respect differences, embrace new ideas, demonstrate intercultural awareness and emotional control, and, above all, handle setbacks and criticisms effectively (Bocciardi et al., 2017). According to Steindórsdóttir et al. (2023), younger individuals are more motivated to expand their horizons, acquire knowledge, strive for professional success, and develop skills that promote their career development. According to Infante-Perea et al. (2019), men and women experience their careers differently. Generally, women encounter more professional barriers than men, which are perceived as obstacles hindering career progression (Infante-Perea et al., 2021).

Support and cooperation play a fundamental role in fostering team spirit, translating into an understanding and recognition of others' work and communication style, demonstrating a certain ease in interpersonal relationships, which is currently one of the most valued skills by employers (Tejan & Sabil, 2019). Furthermore, interpersonal interaction and relationships facilitate the creation of networking, which is extremely relevant for career development. Through a network of contacts, employees gain deeper insights into market trends and access information about job opportunities and developments in their field of activity (Nadermann & Eissenstat, 2018). Career development is an effort individuals make to better understand and be aware of their skills, interests, values, opportunities, and choices that enable them to achieve their goals (Tang, 2020). Consequently, Tripathy (2020) mentions that refining soft skills can open doors, create career development opportunities, and contribute to long-term success.

Performance appraisal plays a crucial role in human resource management as it has a significant impact on the organization's strategic objectives (Naeem et al., 2017). Rubin and Edwards (2020) add that through this evaluation process, organizations motivate their employees, encouraging them to achieve high-quality performance, which is why its importance in the workplace is steadily increasing. According to Memon et al. (2020), in addition

to facilitating goal setting and identifying training needs, performance appraisal allows for comparing employees' performance with their peers and/or their own past performance. Furthermore, it aligns employees' performance with organizational strategy and justifies decisions related to other human resource management practices, particularly compensation management and career progression (Stewart & Brown, 2020). Thus, it is important to align expectations with reality and precisely define (i) task characteristics, (ii) competencies required for adequate job performance, (iii) training needs, and (iv) career development prospects (Al-Jedaia & Mehrez, 2020).

Therefore, performance appraisal is an effective process where employees are assessed to help improve their performance (Iqbal et al., 2019). According to Brown and Heywood (2020), this process contributes to improving employee performance and, consequently, enhances organizational productivity. Providing feedback on performance allows individuals to identify strengths and areas that need improvement (Dangol, 2021). When people have a clear understanding of their competencies, they can more precisely define goals and determine what contributes to advancing their careers (Fahmi & Ali, 2022). Going further, Sugiarti (2022) suggests that consistently high-performing employees are more likely to ascend to higher positions, translating into career advancement. Therefore, investing in continuous learning strategies is crucial to strengthen the knowledge and skills most organizations value, helping individuals gain a competitive advantage over their peers (Ali & Anwar, 2021).

Recognition for work done can increase engagement and job satisfaction, as employees perceive their evaluation results as fair, accurate, and impartial, leading to positive reciprocation (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). Career development is a path influenced by both the individual and the organization, emphasizing the importance of understanding influencing factors (Weng, 2018). In this context, Weng and Zhu (2020) suggest that when organizations define career development plans, employees tend to grow professionally and enhance their individual performance. Okolie et al. (2020) complement this idea, stating that career progression and professional success depend on the quantity and quality of the skills and knowledge possessed by the employee.

Therefore, it is important that their performance be periodically assessed.

Performance appraisal plays a crucial mediating role in the complex interaction between soft skills and career development (Ramola & Rangnekar, 2021). This practice provides a comprehensive view of workers' competencies and directly influences their professional trajectories (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). Through performance appraisal, organizations have the opportunity to recognize and value employees' skills during the performance of their duties (Dangol, 2021).

By mediating the relationship between soft skills and career development, performance appraisal provides an objective basis for strategic decision-making. The results of these assessments can guide individual development by identifying specific areas for soft skills improvement, which, in turn, positively impact career progression (Niati et al., 2021). The evaluation process serves as a communication channel between management and team members, fostering the exchange of constructive ideas about the role of soft skills in professional performance. This dialogue facilitates mutual understanding and promotes alignment of expectations regarding career development (Silva et al., 2020).

An effective performance appraisal system also contributes to creating a work environment that values skills and recognizes their importance for individual and collective success (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Thus, employees are motivated to enhance their skills, knowing that, in addition to contributing to their personal development, they are crucial for advancing in their careers (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). In light of the above, it is evident that performance appraisal acts as a crucial mediator in the relationship between soft skills and career development, providing valuable insights to strengthen employees' competencies and thereby driving continuous growth at both individual and organizational levels (Niati et al., 2021).

Based on the literature review, performance appraisals play a key role in linking soft communication skills to career development, offering valuable information for personal growth while contributing to organizational success.

This study aimed to analyze the mediating role of performance appraisal outcomes in the relationship between soft skills and career development. Considering the mentioned goal, the next hypotheses were developed:

H1: Soft skills positively influence career development.

H2: Performance appraisal influences career development.

H3: The relationship between soft skills and career development is positively mediated by performance appraisal.

2. METHOD

Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to a convenience sample. The study involved the participation of 262 salaried workers in Portugal, 63.7% of whom are female. Table 1 describes the sample characteristics.

Table 1. Sample characterization

Sociodemographic variables	n (%)
Gender	
Male	95 (36.3%)
Female	167 (63.7%)
Age group (M = 42.6; SD = 12.4)	
30 years old and below	57 (21.8%)
Between 31 and 40 years old	38 (14.5%)
Between 41 and 50 years old	92 (35.1%)
51 years old and over	75 (28.6%)
Education level	
Less than a bachelor's degree	108 (41.2%)
Bachelor's degree	120 (45.8%)
Higher than a bachelor's degree	34 (13.0%)
Sector where functions are performed	
Public	159 (60.7%)
Private	103 (39.3%)
Role played	
Operational	56 (21.4%)
Administrative	54 (20.6%)
Technical	84 (32.1%)
Leadership	68 (26.0%)
Seniority (M = 14.7; SD = 11.9)	
5 old and below	91 (34.7%)
Between 6 and 15 years	57 (21.8%)
Between 16 and 25 years	52 (19.8%)
26 years and over	62 (23.7%)

Developed by Rodrigues (2021), the short skills inventory consists of 24 items that assess eight dimensions: (i) Leadership and decision-making (e.g., I often take the initiative); (ii) Support and cooperation (e.g., My co-workers can always count on me); (iii) Interaction and interpersonal relations (e.g., I find it very easy to relate to people of all hierarchical levels); (iv) Analysis and interpretation (e.g., I usually compare information to check similarities, differences, and congruities); (v) Creation and conceptualization (e.g., I see new situations as challenges to overcome); (vi) Organization and execution (e.g., I perform my tasks in an organized manner); (vii) Adaptability (e.g., I can adjust my behavior to different contexts); and (viii) Entrepreneurship and performance (e.g., I am always alert regarding any opportunities for personal development). Responses were provided using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always), depending on the frequency with which the behaviors occur. The results obtained through various studies (e.g., pilot, exploratory, confirmatory) demonstrate that the inventory exhibits highly satisfactory psychometric properties, making it a valid and reliable tool for assessing the skills of university students.

Career development was assessed using the four items from the career growth scale (Weng et al., 2010; e.g., My promotion speed in the present organization is fast), which evaluates how quickly individuals are promoted within the organization. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha, and the values proved to be quite suitable ($\alpha = .80$). Statements were responded to using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

The performance evaluation results were measured using the performance management scale developed by Rodrigues et al. (2017; e.g., I am assessed based on the desired performance goals). The items were responded to using a seven-point agreement scale, where one corresponds to strongly disagree and seven to strongly agree.

Participants also responded to a set of questions about their sociodemographic characteristics (e.g.,

gender, age, educational level). Age and gender were used as control variables. Gender was also used as a control variable.

The data were collected online through questionnaire surveys. The link was sent via email to the researchers' professional contacts. The email included a brief description of the study, information about informed consent, and a commitment to preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Statistical analysis was conducted using the SPSS and AMOS software (version 29).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multivariate normality was assessed using Mardia's statistics (Mardia, 1970) through the Web Power tool¹, which provides information on skewness and kurtosis coefficients along with the p -value. The data were considered normally distributed as the standardized Mardia's coefficient was greater than 5% ($p > 0.05$; Chowdhury et al., 2022).

Harman's single-factor test, including all items, revealed that the unrotated solution explained 30.3% of the total variance. This analysis suggested that the results were not affected by common method bias, as it was below the recommended 50.0% threshold by Enomoto et al. (2020).

It was also observed that skewness (ranging between -0.75 and 0.15) and kurtosis (ranging between -0.87 and 1.27) values for the variables under study fell within the range of -2 to 2 , as recommended by Lam and Zhou (2020).

Furthermore, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) values for all variables exceeded the threshold of 0.70 and 0.50 , respectively (Hair et al., 2019), supporting the convergent validity of the measures. The maximum shared variance (MSV) was analyzed, and the results were lower than AVE, ensuring discriminant validity. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. The results indicated significant associations among all variables. Additionally, age and gender were found to be not significantly associated with the main variables.

¹ available at <https://webpower.psychstat.org/models/kurtosis/>

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	M	SD	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4
1. SS	6.10 ¹	0.56	0.93	0.69	0.12	(0.91)			
2. PAR	5.12 ¹	1.31	0.92	0.67	0.25	0.301**	(0.91)		
3. DC	3.41 ¹	1.64	0.81	0.60	0.30	0.188**	0.517**	(0.84)	
Age	42.62	12.47	–	–	–	0.042	–0.068	–0.177	–
Gender	–	–	–	–	–	–0.124	0.034	0.107	–0.215**

Note: $N = 262$; ** $p < 0.001$; SS = Soft skills; RAD = Performance appraisal results; CD = Career development; M = Mean; SD = Standard-deviation; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance. ¹Scale ranging from 1 to 7; Cronbach's Alpha scores are in brackets. ²Gender codes: 0 = female; 1 = male.

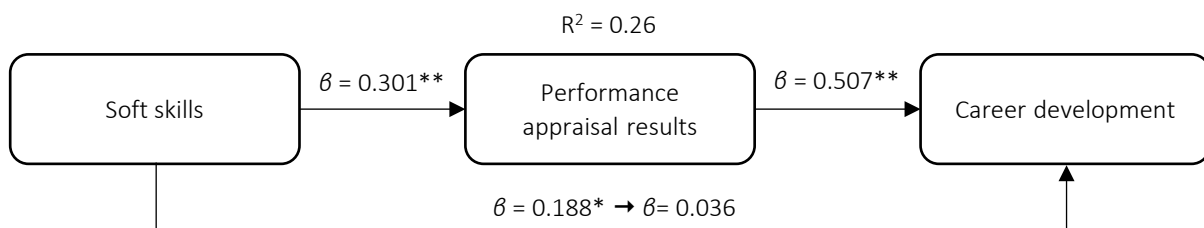
Subsequently, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test whether the measured variables adequately represent the latent factors responsible for the behavior of the observed variables (Alavi et al., 2020). The results demonstrated that, after covarying the errors indicated by modification indices in AMOS, the model was found to be well-fitted to the sample data [$\chi^2_{(478)} = 1.87$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89; SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.05, LO90 = 0.05, HI90 = 0.06]. The research hypotheses were tested according to the proposed model in the next step.

The first hypothesis, assuming that soft skills positively influence career development, was confirmed. The results of the linear regression showed a direct and statistically significant relationship between the predictor variable and the criterion variable ($\beta = 0.188$, $t = 3.093$, $p < 0.05$). It was also determined that the model is linear and significant ($F_{(1, 260)} = 9.467$, $p < 0.05$). The obtained coefficients indicate that the more developed the soft skills are, the greater the tendency to progress in one's career.

It was also found that career development is favorably influenced by the performance appraisal results, supporting the second hypothesis ($\beta = 0.517$, $t = 9.749$, $p < 0.001$). The results suggest that 26.8% of the possibility of progressing in the career is explained by the performance appraisal results.

Finally, the causal model of soft skills in career development, mediated by the performance appraisal results, was assessed using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2018). The results demonstrate that with the entry of the mediator variable into the model (Figure 1), the influence of soft skills on career development becomes non-significant ($\beta = 0.036$, $t = 0.640$, $p > 0.05$), indicating complete mediation. Next, 5,000 bias-corrected bootstraps were estimated with 95% confidence intervals. After bootstrapping, it was found that the total effect of performance appraisal results on the relationship between soft skills and career development is significant (95% CI [0.20, 0.90], $p < 0.05$)

Performance appraisal represents an opportunity to provide constructive feedback to employees (Rodrigues et al., 2023). This allows professionals to identify areas that need improvement and to establish a career development plan (Nuraeni et al., 2022). The results from performance appraisal serve as a critical link between soft skills and career development. By incorporating effective assessment of these skills, organizations can create a work environment that values both technical and interpersonal competencies, thereby fostering long-term professional success (Febrian et al., 2023).



Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Mediation model

The assessment of soft skills provides valuable insights into individual behavioral competencies, contributing to career development and progression (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). This study explores the mediating role of performance appraisal outcomes in the relationship between soft skills and career development, underscoring that clear and relevant evaluation criteria contribute to fostering personal and professional growth (Niati et al., 2021). A well-conducted performance appraisal offers employees the opportunity to address gaps and advance in their careers, motivating them and encouraging more effective performance, thereby contributing to organizational success (Rubin & Edwards, 2020).

Data analysis revealed that the more developed soft skills are, the greater the tendency for employees to progress in their careers, validating H1. These results align with findings by Short and Keller-Bell (2021), emphasizing the crucial role of transferable skills in professional development across sectors and professions. These skills complement technical and field-specific abilities, forming the foundation for short-term, medium-term, and long-term professional success (Eva & Afroze, 2021). Consistent with this finding, Tripathy (2020) demonstrated that behavioral competencies can unlock new opportunities and drive growth in a workplace context.

Furthermore, it was found that performance appraisal significantly influences the professional trajectory of employees, supporting the validation of H2. By identifying areas of excellence and those that can be improved, performance appraisal contributes to setting goals and objectives that guide career choices and developing strategies to achieve them (Memon et al., 2020). Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2019) add that rigorously assessed workers have more opportunities for career advancement. Additionally, self-reflection during the evaluation process contributes to self-awareness (Dangol, 2021). This understanding is valuable for encouraging professionals to seek continuous improvement of their skills (Fahmi & Ali, 2022). Rodrigues et al. (2023) complement this idea, asserting that only through performance appraisal it is possible to measure workers' competencies and how they contribute to organizational success.

The third hypothesis was also validated, as it was observed that the relationship between soft skills and career development is positively mediated by performance appraisal, aligning with the work of Ramola and Rangnekar (2021). Similarly, Niati et al. (2021) suggest that by mediating the relationship between transferable skills and career progression, performance appraisal guides and informs organizational strategic decisions. Therefore, workers are motivated to enhance their skills, knowing that these not only contribute to their personal development but are also crucial for advancing in their careers (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). Sugiarti (2022) adds that by providing valuable insights to strengthen competencies, performance appraisal drives the growth of both the individual and the organization.

This study underscores the significance of soft skills in the workplace and their influence on professional success and career progression. It is crucial to alert organizations to the development of an organizational culture that fosters the enhancement of soft skills through continuous learning practices. Furthermore, it contributes to drawing the attention of human resources professionals to the relevance of performance appraisal, as it constitutes a fundamental tool for providing feedback to employees regarding their strengths and areas requiring improvement.

It is noteworthy that the mediating role of performance appraisal in the relationship between soft skills and career progression facilitates the decision-making process and propels the development of training initiatives that contribute to achieving both the employees' and the organization's objectives. By offering a holistic view of performance, the evaluation process guides employees in enhancing their interpersonal skills, thus propelling their professional development.

This paper presents several limitations, notably the fact that over 60.0% of participants are female, thus emphasizing the relevance of balancing group sizes. Additionally, the self-evaluative nature of the questionnaires may have introduced bias to the results, given that, in general, employees tend to overvalue their competencies and perceive themselves as capable of assuming higher positions. It is not uncommon for performance evaluation results to be deemed inappropriate and

unjust, as they may not accurately reflect the work performed. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies collect data from direct supervisors and peers to assess potential differences in results.

It could also be insightful to evaluate the impact of training on enhancing soft skills. In this context, the suggestion is made for a longitudinal study to ascertain whether results vary over time and to identify whether career development and performance appraisal are influenced by training initiatives.

Furthermore, it is advised to include more control variables (e.g., tenure in the position, sector of em-

ployment) and analyze them alongside those already included in the study (e.g., gender and age) to understand whether these factors affect the results. Beyond performance appraisal, it is crucial to consider other factors that may mediate the relationship between soft skills and career development, such as motivation, supervisor support, and organizational culture.

It is considered pertinent to investigate whether the impact of soft skills on career progression varies across different sectors or industries, considering the specific nuances of each workplace environment.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly dynamic and competitive work environment, soft skills emerge as crucial elements for professional success. This study delved into the significance of these competencies in career development, with performance appraisal serving as a mediating mechanism. The findings underscore that cross-cutting skills are fundamental for the construction of robust and sustainable professional trajectories, and it is through performance appraisal that these skills are acknowledged and validated.

The evaluation process not only benefits individual contributors but also constitutes a source of strategic advantage for any organization. When individuals believe they will be treated fairly during their performance appraisal, they develop positive sentiments toward the organization and commit to its objectives, fostering a more collaborative and productive work environment. In light of the foregoing, it is evident that soft skills exert a significant influence on career development, and performance appraisal emerges as a valuable means to recognize and promote these competencies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Data curation: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Formal analysis: Rosa Rodrigues.

Investigation: Andreia Dias.

Methodology: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Project administration: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Resources: Andreia Dias.

Software: Rosa Rodrigues.

Supervision: Rosa Rodrigues.

Validation: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Visualization: Andreia Dias.

Writing – original draft: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

Writing – review & editing: Rosa Rodrigues, Andreia Dias.

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