

FASHION AS A SYMBOL OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY: PHILOSOPHY OF CONSUMPTION IN MASS CULTURE

A MODA COMO SÍMBOLO DE HIERARQUIA SOCIAL: FILOSOFIA DE CONSUMO NA CULTURA DE MASSA

GALYNA POPERECHNA

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University, Ternopil, Ukraine
poperechna.h.a.1982@gmail.com

TAMILA PRYHODA-DONETS

Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University, Lutsk, Ukraine
tamprygoda@gmail.com

KSENIIA NIKOLENKO

Kryvy Rih Educational and Scientific Institute, Donetsk State University of Internal Affairs, Kryvy Rih, Ukraine
Nikolenkokslenia985@gmail.com

ZORISLAV MAKAROV

Vinnitsia National Agrarian University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine
phtim@ukr.net

OLENA TYTAR

V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv, Ukraine
tytarolena77@gmail.com

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Corresponding author:

poperechna.h.a.1982@gmail.com



Abstract: This study aims to analyse fashion as a symbol of social hierarchy and its role in shaping the philosophy of consumption in mass culture. Methods. The article employs the case study method to explore fashion as a social mechanism for establishing status markers and symbolic boundaries between social groups. Simmel's theory served as the foundation for understanding how fashion balances two opposing tendencies—imitation and differentiation—thereby maintaining social hierarchies through visual self-expression. Results. The analysis revealed that fashion is a tool for sustaining social hierarchies and serves as a means of social integration. A dynamic interaction between high fashion and street style was observed, illustrating how new styles initially gained elite status and disseminated among broader social groups, prompting the elite to seek new forms of expression. Conclusions. The study highlights the significance of fashion as an instrument of self-identification and integration within mass culture, enabling individuals to feel both unique and part of a social group. Fashion's ability to reflect social changes and societal structures underscores its importance in the philosophy of consumption. The findings affirm fashion's role as a mechanism for maintaining social order and integration and a tool for understanding contemporary transformations in consumer practices and social interactions.

Keywords: Social roles. Consumer culture. Symbolism of fashion. Mass consciousness. Cultural values. Philosophy of culture.

Resumo: Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar a moda como um símbolo de hierarquia social e seu papel na formação da filosofia de consumo na cultura de massa. Métodos. O artigo emprega o método de estudo de caso para explorar a moda

como um mecanismo social para estabelecer marcadores de status e limites simbólicos entre grupos

sociais. A teoria de Simmel serviu de base para entender como a moda equilibra duas tendências opostas - imitação e diferenciação - mantendo assim as hierarquias sociais por meio da autoexpressão visual. Resultados. A análise revelou que a moda é uma ferramenta para manter as hierarquias sociais e serve como meio de integração social. Foi observada uma interação dinâmica entre a alta moda e o estilo de rua, ilustrando como os novos estilos inicialmente ganharam status de elite e se disseminaram entre grupos sociais mais amplos, levando a elite a buscar novas formas de expressão. Conclusões. O estudo destaca a importância da moda como um instrumento de autoidentificação e integração na cultura de massa, permitindo que os indivíduos se sintam únicos e parte de um grupo social. A capacidade da moda de refletir as mudanças sociais e as estruturas da sociedade ressalta sua importância na filosofia do consumo. As descobertas afirmam o papel da moda como um mecanismo para manter a ordem e a integração social e uma ferramenta para entender as transformações contemporâneas nas práticas de consumo e nas interações sociais.

Palavras-chave: Papéis sociais. Cultura de consumo. Simbolismo da moda. Consciência de massa. Valores culturais. Filosofia da cultura.

1. Introduction

In the economic, historical, and sociological literature on fashion, many authors emphasise the insufficient research on fashion as a significant social phenomenon, reflecting limited scholarly interest in this field. Fashion is often regarded as a superficial phenomenon or a tool for social manipulation that merely stimulates consumption (GRONOW, 2024). However, during the 1990s and 2000s, interdisciplinary research on fashion, known as “fashionology,” experienced notable development (SIMMEL, 2020). This study integrates diverse social sciences to establish a new theoretical framework for conceptualising fashion as a phenomenon between the constant flux of fashion trends and the scientific pursuit of systematic theories.

Today, fashion seeks recognition as a legitimate object of academic inquiry due to its complexity and profound symbolism, which reflects cultural values. Such efforts often encounter challenges in data collection and systematisation (GILSON; GOUHIER, 2023). Creative industries, including fashion, are characterised by data scarcity, particularly in measuring styles, creativity, and cultural trends. This complicates the academic study of fashion as an essential mechanism that shapes social hierarchies and structures consumption within mass consciousness.

Fashion can be perceived as a set of aesthetic norms and as a symbolic tool that constructs social roles and defines status markers within society (SINNERBRINK, 2020). In this sense, fashion expresses social affiliation or alienation, creating symbolic boundaries between social groups (TIURINA, 2022). Moreover, fashion symbolically integrates individuals into specific social structures, forming a “collective identity through individual styles,” emphasising individualisation and belonging to a particular group or subculture (RIABOVA et al., 2022).

Thus, this study addresses a scholarly gap related to the need to understand fashion as a multifaceted phenomenon that symbolises social hierarchy and plays a vital role in shaping the philosophy of consumption within mass culture.

At the level of contemporary consumer culture, fashion not only determines social roles, influencing individual identity and self-determination but also shapes prestige and social significance, facilitating an understanding of social status (Bauman, 2007; Simmel, 2008). Functioning as a crucial symbolic mechanism, fashion reflects prevailing societal

values and structures consumer practices, where the choice of style, brand, or trend allows individuals to identify themselves within a particular social structure, emphasising their status (Crane, 2012). This process gains particular importance in the philosophy of consumption, which highlights the symbolic aspects of goods and services acquisition and their influence on social roles and societal structures (Featherstone, 1991).

Modern studies of fashion require an interdisciplinary approach and an analysis of its significance as a phenomenon shaping societal and cultural values, as it often serves as a means of communication and a demonstration of social status (Entwistle, 2000). As a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in consumer habits and cultural codes, fashion is critical in maintaining or undermining social hierarchies and reinforcing mass consciousness and ideals (Kawamura, 2018). Therefore, its study can contribute to a deeper understanding of social hierarchies and the dynamics of cultural interaction, particularly in contemporary mass consumption, making this topic relevant to sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies.

The research gap this study seeks to fill lies in the insufficient exploration of fashion as a multifaceted social phenomenon capable of reflecting cultural trends and functioning as a critical tool for social hierarchy within the context of mass culture and consumer society. Despite many works examining fashion from an economic or cultural perspective, limited understanding exists of how fashion shapes social roles, defines status markers, and creates symbolic boundaries between social groups.

This study is novel through its interdisciplinary methodology, combining sociology, cultural studies, and the philosophy of consumption to uncover the deeper social mechanisms underlying popular fashion trends. Specifically, it focuses on two interconnected processes—imitation and differentiation—that sustain existing social hierarchies through fashion. Thus, the research demonstrates how fashion serves as a means of social integration and functions as a key element in forming collective identity, where individuality coexists with group affiliations.

This approach allows fashion to be viewed as an aesthetic or consumer phenomenon and an important symbolic tool that structures social interactions and affirms social roles in the collective consciousness. This perspective opens up new opportunities for studying social transformations and the cultural values accompanying them while emphasizing fashion's role in forming, maintaining, and transforming social hierarchies within contemporary consumer society.

This research is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of fashion as a multifaceted symbolic phenomenon that, beyond its aesthetic function, actively interacts with social structures and consumer practices. Analyzing these interactions allows for greater insight into how fashion contributes to the formation of social hierarchies and how it reflects changes in social roles and cultural values within mass culture.

Understanding Fashion from the Perspective of Industry Influence and Social Change

The concept of fashion is complex and can be approached from multiple angles. Firstly, fashion can be understood as the clothing and luxury industry (including cosmetics), where different stakeholders, such as professionals and companies, build careers or develop business strategies (DEVADZE; GECHBAIA, 2024). In this context, fashion encompasses consumer behaviour patterns of individuals, groups, or social classes, using clothing as a means of self-expression and identity formation (RODINOVA et al., 2024). This interpretation of fashion as an industry intersects with the concept of “adornment” (MARUKHOVSKA-KARTUNOVA et al., 2024a), yet it significantly differs by incorporating not only clothing but also accessories, jewellery, tattoos, and makeup, allowing fashion to transcend the confines of a single industry.

Secondly, fashion can be viewed as a specific type of social change (IKWUKA et al., 2024), characterised by regularity and non-cumulative (KANG, 2019) and extending to various domains of social life. These changes are regular because they occur over short intervals, such as twice a year in the case of spring-summer and autumn-winter clothing collections (PADMANABHAN, 2023). At the same time, fashion is non-cumulative, as new trends replace previous ones without adding new elements to what came before. Unlike scientific, technical, or even artistic changes, where development occurs gradually, the new completely supplants the old in fashion. As VERES (2022) explains, scientific discovery never emerges from an intellectual vacuum. However, it builds on prior knowledge that is revised and expanded, such as quantum physics, which developed from classical Newtonian physics.

The social changes characterised by fashion extend far beyond clothing and can manifest across a broad spectrum of social life. For example, fashion influences the selection of baby names (STIEGLER; ROUSSOW, 2020), the implementation of new managerial

ideas (PESQUEUX, 2020), and the evolution of facial hair styles in men (LETOURNEUX; PASSINI, 2021).

Both Approaches to Defining Fashion and Their Interconnection

Both approaches to defining fashion are interrelated, as the fashion industry generates styles that align with the principles of regular, non-cumulative changes. Simultaneously, certain aspects of fashion as a form of social change can transcend the boundaries of the fashion industry—for instance, trends in men’s facial hair (CHRISTIAN, 2022). Similarly, some elements of the fashion industry are not the result of regular non-cumulative changes, such as textile production technologies.

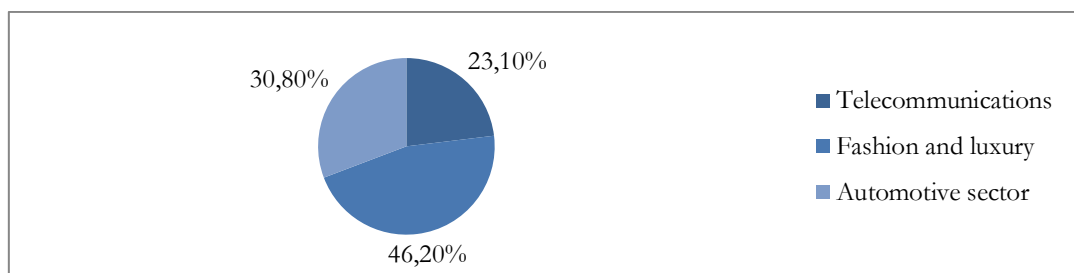
Thus, fashion's role as an industry and symbol of social change forms the basis for understanding it as a phenomenon that shapes societal hierarchies and reflects the philosophy of consumption in mass culture.

The Fashion and Luxury Industry as an Embodiment of Social Hierarchy and the Philosophy of Consumption

The fashion and luxury industry plays a key role in economic activity and represents a significant component of the global market. According to (DULCI, 2019), in 2000, this sector accounted for nearly 6% of global consumption across all industries, amounting to €1,400 billion. The automotive sector accounted for less than 4%, while the telecommunications, equipment, and services sector represented only 3%.

Hence, the fashion industry has a profound impact on the economy and social structure, serving as a symbol of status and social distinction (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The fashion industry as a component of the global market.



Source: authors' own data (DULCI, 2019)

Fashion is at the intersection of art and industry: its artistic aspect is manifested in the creation of collections presented at fashion shows in New York, London, Milan or Paris,

while its industrial aspect is manifested in the resolution of specific issues such as pricing, choice of distribution channels and location of production facilities (BRANS; KUIPERS, 2023). As emphasised by (HELLER, 2022), fashion is a symbolic tool that gives raw materials, such as cotton or silk, a special status through the ‘magical’ influence of brands and designer labels that give clothing a social distinction.

The social dimension of fashion is particularly evident in its division into ‘women's’ and ‘men's’ fashion, each with its own production trends and commercial specifics (HOPPE, 2021). Women's fashion is dominant in economic importance and dynamism, so most studies focus on it (ZALEŃSKA, 2022). Fashion is the production of goods and symbols that carry social meaning. Due to its ability to transform fabric into clothing and create aesthetic objects, fashion acquires the characteristics of a ‘total social fact’ - a phenomenon that combines economic, aesthetic and social aspects that allow defining and maintaining social statuses in society.

Fashion as a cultural industry has become an object of attention in many fields: economics, sociology, cultural and gender studies. For example, (NIEDŹWIEDŹ, 2022) defines ‘creative industries’ as those that differ from others due to the central role of aesthetics in the production process. In sociology, new approaches are emerging to study the influence of fashion on individuals' choices, where culture plays the role of a mechanism underlying social hierarchies (LAKOMY, 2022). Geography also examines the location of creative industries and their impact on urban economies (DOMAŃSKI, 2023), while urban studies analyse the ‘creative class’ role in developing urban economies (OZIMSKA, 2023).

Thus, the fashion industry not only reflects cultural values but also actively shapes social hierarchy, acting as a tool for self-determination and social differentiation. Interest in fashion, in its cultural and economic aspects, allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of consumption underlying modern society and its significance as a symbol of social hierarchy in mass culture.

2. Case Presentation

The ‘total social fact’ concept, introduced by Marcel Mauss, is of great importance for understanding the complex nature of fashion as a social phenomenon. However, this term is extremely ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Moss criticised the over-theorising

that has led to fragmented and often contradictory interpretations of the concept (BERTHON et al., 2024; MORA, 2021).

OLIYNYK (2023) notes that a total social fact encompasses society and its institutions, and it can be argued that fashion is such a fact as it permeates aesthetic, economic, political and social spheres. Fashion research often reduces it to a singular aspect, overlooking its broader influence on social identity and structure. Existing studies typically concentrate on specific facets of fashion, such as its economic or aesthetic impact, without fully exploring its role in shaping and reinforcing social hierarchies. In addition, there is a clear gap in understanding how fashion evolves in response to social changes and how its perception varies across different cultural contexts.

The ‘total social fact’ concept allows us to approach fashion as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing a wide array of social and cultural elements. This broader perspective enables a more comprehensive analysis, recognising fashion as a tool for consumption or aesthetic expression and as a mechanism that shapes and reflects social hierarchies.

As a marker of social stratification, fashion plays a significant role in determining individual identity and one’s position within the broader social structure. Scholars, including MISHALOVA, HORDIICHUK, and SOKOLOVSKY (2024), have examined the connection between fashion and social status, emphasising the social dynamics that drive changes in fashion trends.

Studies of fashion in the context of social hierarchy often focus on its elite forms, such as haute couture, while neglecting other expressions of fashion, such as street style or subcultures. Additionally, insufficient attention is given to the global dimension of fashion, particularly with respect to the growing influence of emerging fashion hubs like China and India and their impact on traditional social structures.

Fashion as a symbol of social hierarchy allows us to build theoretical models that explain how style and symbols can support or undermine existing social relations. Studying social statuses through fashion provides a deeper understanding of cultural and economic change dynamics in society.

The philosophy of consumption, viewed through the lens of fashion, is an important tool for analysing how consumer practices shape cultural values and social statuses. Along with self-affirmation, symbolisation and imperialisation principles, as noted by FANG

(2023), SENOOAN; VIDA (2023), studies of fashion as a consumer culture show its connection to economic and social processes.

Existing research on the philosophy of consumption in fashion often overlooks how fashion can transform cultural meanings through integration with other areas, such as technology or politics. Little attention is usually paid to how changes in fashion can be interpreted through globalisation and multiculturalism.

The principles of consumer culture, including self-affirmation and symbolisation, not only describe but also explain changes in cultural patterns and social practices through fashion.

These principles make it possible to understand how fashion is turning into a tool of social identification and cultural expression, which is important for analysing mass culture (Table 1):

Table 1: Basic principles of fashion as a social phenomenon: results of the literature analysis

Principle	Definition	Authors
Self-affirmation	Using fashion to imitate or distinguish oneself from others	FANG (2023)
Convergence	The diversity of styles is transformed into a limited number of trends set by fashion houses	SENOOANE; WIID (2023)
Autonomy	Fashion houses have partial independence in their aesthetic decisions	MOORE (2023)
Personalisation	The fashion designer becomes the central figure in setting fashion trends	ROBINSON (2023)
Symbolisation	Brands are important as symbols that form a link between producers and consumers	MOHAMMADI; NOORI (2023)

Source: authors' own development

Current approaches to the study of fashion have both disadvantages and advantages. One of the main disadvantages is that the study of fashion outside of the elite context needs to be addressed, which limits understanding of this phenomenon to the high classes and the luxury industry. In addition, insufficient attention is paid to emerging fashion centres such as China or India, which already significantly impact global trends but have yet to become significant research targets. Another disadvantage is the focus on specific aspects of fashion, such as economic or aesthetic impact, which does not allow us to see the complete picture of the social and cultural processes associated with fashion.

On the other hand, modern approaches to studying fashion also have advantages. Firstly, fashion as a ‘total social fact’ allows us to look at its complexity and multifacetedness as it permeates various spheres of life - from social to economic and cultural. Secondly, research into the philosophy of consumption helps us better understand social and cultural dynamics, mainly how fashion trends reflect societal changes. Finally, fashion actively shapes social roles, supporting or undermining existing social hierarchies, making it an essential tool for studying changes in social structures (Table 2):

Table 2: Disadvantages and advantages of modern approaches to fashion research

Disadvantages	Advantages
The study of fashion outside the elite context is often ignored	Fashion as a ‘total social fact’ allows us to look at its complexity and multifaceted nature
Insufficient attention to new fashion centres (China, India)	Research into the philosophy of consumption helps to understand social and cultural dynamics
Focus on certain aspects of fashion (economic or aesthetic impact)	Fashion actively shapes social roles, supporting or undermining social hierarchies

Source: authors' own development

Previous research on fashion, social hierarchy and consumer philosophy has made significant advances. However, there are still critical gaps in understanding the role of fashion as a multifaceted and dynamic social phenomenon. Fashion is a tool of self-expression or consumer desire and a powerful mechanism of social inclusion and distinction that actively

influences social and cultural structures. The study of fashion as a social fact allows us to reveal its versatility and significance in modern society.

Case Study on Fashion as a Social Form Balancing Imitation and Differentiation

This case study examines the dualistic nature of fashion in the social structure based on Georg Simmel's theory (SIMMEL, 2020) and his idea of the coexistence of imitation and differentiation as critical guidelines in social life. Simmel argues that fashion is a social phenomenon that expresses two opposing human aspirations: the need to belong, which is manifested through imitation, and the desire to be different, which is realised through individualisation.

In terms of imitation, fashion represents the collective behaviour of aligning oneself with a particular social group, where a specific style or image signifies social status (NAN; COB, 2024). Conversely, fashion as differentiation functions as a personal act of self-expression, enabling individuals to highlight their distinctiveness. A social process emerges when the upper classes set new fashion trends that are subsequently followed by the lower classes, forcing the elite to create new style solutions to maintain their hierarchical distinction. In this way, fashion becomes a tool that allows people to feel a sense of social belonging and preserve their individuality simultaneously.

An Example of the Application of Simmel's Theory: High and Street Brands

To illustrate this mechanism, let us look at the interaction between haute couture (e.g., Chanel, Dior) and streetwear, represented by brands such as Supreme or Off-White (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Chanel FW 2024/25 collection

Source: (POLIAK, 2024)

Initially, high-end brands remained limited to a narrow circle of high-income consumers, and their style was inaccessible to the masses. On the other hand, street style, originally considered to be the style of youth subcultures, was not associated with elitism but rather expressed belonging to groups that stood apart from mainstream trends.

However, with mass culture's development and social media's proliferation, the interaction between haute couture and street style began to change (HALAVSKA et al., 2022). High fashion brands have started integrating streetwear elements into their collections, creating exclusive limited edition models that have become popular among the elite and the mass audience through collaboration with street brands. A cyclical process occurs: when street style gains high fashion status, it is followed by wider social circles, and the trend loses its elite character. This, in turn, stimulates high-street brands to create new styles in order to maintain their uniqueness in the highest social circles.

Social Hierarchy Through Fashion

In line with Simmel's theory, this example confirms that fashion is an aesthetic expression and a symbol of social hierarchy. The interaction between haute couture and street style demonstrates a dynamic process in which fashion adapts to social changes while satisfying the need for imitation for some and differentiation for others (MARUKHOVSKA-KARTUNOVA, 2024b). Belonging to a certain style not only symbolises social status but

also maintains differences between different groups, emphasising the social structure in which fashion becomes a tool for maintaining hierarchy.

Simmel also emphasises that fashion as a 'total social fact' reflects the needs of society that go beyond individual desire (SIMMEL, 2020). For example, when pointy shoes are fashionable, those who follow the trend imitate the shape and support the culturally defined norm. In this way, fashion legitimises behaviour that might be considered excessive in normal circumstances. It becomes a field where freedom and duty coexist: the freedom of individual choice and the obligation to follow social standards.

Thus, this case study reveals how fashion is an important social phenomenon that serves as a tool for maintaining social hierarchy in mass culture (ZHILIN et al., 2023). Fashion serves a dual function: it fosters social cohesion by giving individuals a sense of belonging to specific groups while granting them the freedom to assert their individuality and establish new markers of difference. So, fashion shapes the consumption philosophy within mass culture, mediating the tension between personal distinctiveness and collective affiliation.

The study contributes significantly to the fields of social mechanisms and the philosophy of consumption by elucidating fashion's dual role as a symbol of social hierarchy and an instrument that structures interactions between individuals and social groups. Employing a case study methodology and drawing on Georg Simmel's theoretical framework, the authors examine how fashion harmonises the opposing forces of imitation and differentiation, thereby sustaining social hierarchies through visual markers and stylistic choices.

This research identifies the dynamic interaction between haute couture and street style, demonstrating how emerging fashion trends gain elite status before spreading across broader social strata. This finding affirms that fashion is not solely a tool of self-expression but also a powerful mechanism for social integration, playing a pivotal role in forming and preserving social boundaries and status markers.

The study's practical significance lies in expanding our understanding of fashion as a cultural phenomenon and a crucial instrument in constructing collective identity. It also provides insight into how fashion reflects and responds to shifts in social structures and consumption ideologies. In this context, fashion is revealed as an industry and a social process that actively shapes cultural codes and status symbols.

3. Conclusion

The study confirms the importance of fashion as a symbol of social hierarchy and a tool that structures the philosophy of consumption in mass culture. According to the review of economic, historical and sociological literature, fashion often remains outside of scientific attention due to the perception of it as a superficial or manipulative phenomenon designed to stimulate consumption. However, an interdisciplinary approach opens up new possibilities for understanding fashion as a phenomenon that shapes the social structure, defines status markers and contributes to creating collective identity through individual styles.

Fashion combines consumer practices and social hierarchies, not only as a set of aesthetic norms but also as a social mechanism regulating society's identity. Fashion should be viewed not only as a clothing and luxury industry but also as a dynamic phenomenon that reflects deep social processes. The regular changes characteristic of fashion contrast with the cumulative processes in science and technology, emphasising its role as a driving force in the social structure that actively shapes consumer practices and symbols of social status.

The study of the fashion and luxury industry demonstrates its impact on economic activity and social structures. The fashion industry, which accounts for a significant share of global consumption, operates on the borderline of art and industry, transforming material resources into objects endowed with symbolic meaning. Thus, fashion has become an aesthetic, economic, and social phenomenon that constructs social statuses.

Based on Georg Simmel's theory, the case study confirmed that fashion functions as a social form that combines imitation and differentiation. The analysis of the interaction between haute couture and street style shows how fashion adapts to social changes, creating style solutions to maintain status differences. This social process shows that fashion is a means of self-expression and a structural element that maintains societal hierarchy.

Thus, fashion in mass culture is a means of integrating individuals into social structures, allowing them to express belonging to a certain group and preserve their individuality. The study of fashion as a symbol of social hierarchy helps to better understand the mechanisms of consumption in modern society and its role in constructing collective identity and maintaining social order.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

Ethical approval statement

Ethical approval is not applicable for this research.

Informed consent

Informed consent to the publication of personal data in this article obtained from the participant(s) does not apply according to the type of article.