



Dramaturgical interaction in virtual reality as a stage for self-presentation: A study on five content creators in Jakarta

Hany Ditania¹, Rusfadia Saktiyanti Jahja^{2*}, Atik Kurniawati³

^{1,2,3}*Department of Sociology, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia*

*Corresponding author

Email address: saktiyanti@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the forms of self-presentation performed by content creators on Instagram through a dramaturgical approach, as well as to explain the role of followers in shaping the creators' identity presentation on social media. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study method, conducted from January to August 2023. The subjects consist of five Instagram content creators aged 20–30 years, all based in Jakarta. Data was collected through observation, interviews, documentation, and literature study, and were further supported by expert insights in the field of social media. The data were analyzed using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The findings reveal that content creators construct their digital persona on the front stage through curated visual content, a consistent communication style, and narratives tailored to audience expectations. Meanwhile, aspects of private life and emotional fatigue are managed backstage as part of a more personal space. Followers play a role in shaping content creators' identities through comments, direct messages, and interactions that foster one-sided emotional connection. Identity on Instagram is not a pure reflection of the self but the result of personal strategy, algorithmic pressure, and the ongoing demand for social connectivity.

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Introduction

In the digital era, social interaction does not only occur in the real world, but also takes place virtually through social media. This platform is not only a long-distance communication tool, but also a space to express yourself, form an identity, and build social relationships. Based on a report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), the use of social media in Indonesia has experienced significant growth in the last five years. As of January 2024, the number of social media users reached 221.5 million people out of a total population of 278.7 million, with an internet penetration rate of 79.3 percent. This increase is driven by the ease of internet access, the growth of smartphone use, and the increasing popularity of various social media platforms.

In the midst of the rapid digital flow, social media has become an integral part of daily activities, from working, studying, shopping, to channeling hobbies. One of the platforms that stands out is Instagram, which is popular among young people because of its visual features that allow users to craft personal, creative, and aesthetic narratives. Through feeds, reels, stories, and close friends, users can share various aspects of their lives. Instagram also continues to present new features such as Instagram Live and IGTV, which further strengthen the practice of self-presentation, where users not only share content spontaneously, but also strategically manage images.

This phenomenon is evident in content creators on Instagram, who build curated visual narratives to create a certain impression in front of the public. Based on Datareportal, by 2024 the number of active Instagram users in Indonesia is estimated to reach 120 million people, or around 43% of the total population. This figure shows that Instagram is not just a medium for sharing

photos, but also an important space to form social identity and gain validation through likes, comments, and followers. Content creators play the role of social actors who consciously manage impressions through the content created.

In the context of Goffman's dramaturgy, social life is understood as the performance of a drama. The front stage is where individuals display behavior according to public expectations, while the back stage is a space where individuals are free to express themselves. On Instagram, the front stage is reflected in aesthetic visual uploads, selected narratives, and interaction with the audience, while the backstage represents a more authentic real life. Followers play an active role in giving direction through comments, likes, and certain expectations for the image of a content creator, so that the relationship between image and audience becomes dynamic.

The phenomenon of content creators' self-presentation on Instagram is important to be studied using dramaturgy because it provides a critical perspective on how social media affects the meaning of identity and social relationships. Content management is not a spontaneous action, but a selection process to display the desired image. Identity on Instagram is something that is "shown", not just owned. This research focused on five content creators in Jakarta, with Goffman's dramaturgy approach, to understand how they build and maintain their self-image, as well as how real life remains present as a backstage despite being hidden from the public spotlight.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type to intensively investigate an event, activity, process, or group of individuals in a real-life context. The digital ethnographic approach was applied

through online observation on Instagram social media, carried out from January to August 2023, including online observations, documentation, and in-depth interviews with five content creators in Jakarta. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on relevant criteria, namely content creators aged 20–30 years who are actively building and managing their self-image on Instagram. Data collection uses primary data from observations and interviews as well as secondary data from journals, articles, theses, books, and online documentation. Data analysis is carried out qualitatively by examining all data, organizing, selecting relevant ones, interpreting meanings, creating analysis narratives, and drawing conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Motivation and purpose of Instagram account

Management From the results of interviews that have been conducted with the five content creators, it can be seen that the reason they are active on Instagram is not just to share moments or have fun. The majority of them admitted that they already have directed goals, whether it is for a professional career, building personal

branding, or conveying messages that they think are important. Account management is also carried out with the awareness that Instagram is not only a personal space, but also a "face" that many people will see. In line with the narration of informants in this study, where they said that they were active in sharing content according to their preferred fields. To make it easier to understand, the following is a summary of the motivation, type of content, and image strategy of each informant:

Of the five informants, the motivation in managing Instagram accounts is diverse but still focuses on awareness of building self-image strategically. The resulting content not only reflects interest, but is also geared towards building relationships with the audience. The use of Instagram features such as feeds and stories allows creators to convey messages, maintain consistency, and expand reach as part of personal branding. Although content styles vary, account management is done consciously, planned, and has a specific purpose, in line with Goffman's concept of the "front stage" in Goffman's dramaturgy that emphasizes managing impressions in social interactions. Thus, the content shared is not just an upload, but a way for creators to build a relevant, attractive, and sustainable self-image.

Table 1. Motivation and purpose of Instagram account management by informants

No.	Informant	Type of Content	Purpose of Account Management	Citra Strategy built
1.	@sahlahyusuf (SYB)	Feminist, self-care	Voice personal and social issues	Safe and inspiring space
2.	@hildansl (HN)	Culinary (foodies)	Sharing recipes for healthy and practical cooking	"Kitchen friends" and friendly individuals
3.	@dinisyah.a (DA)	Beauty	Personal branding and beauty education	Positive, supportive, and cheerful
4.	@viiaa.agstn (NVA)	Product reviews	Help the audience choose functional and practical items	Informative and practical
5.	@its.gilang1 (GRV)	Photography	Self-expression and image building	Aesthetic, inspiring, and trendy

Source: Results processed by researchers (2023)

Form of self-presentation on the front stage

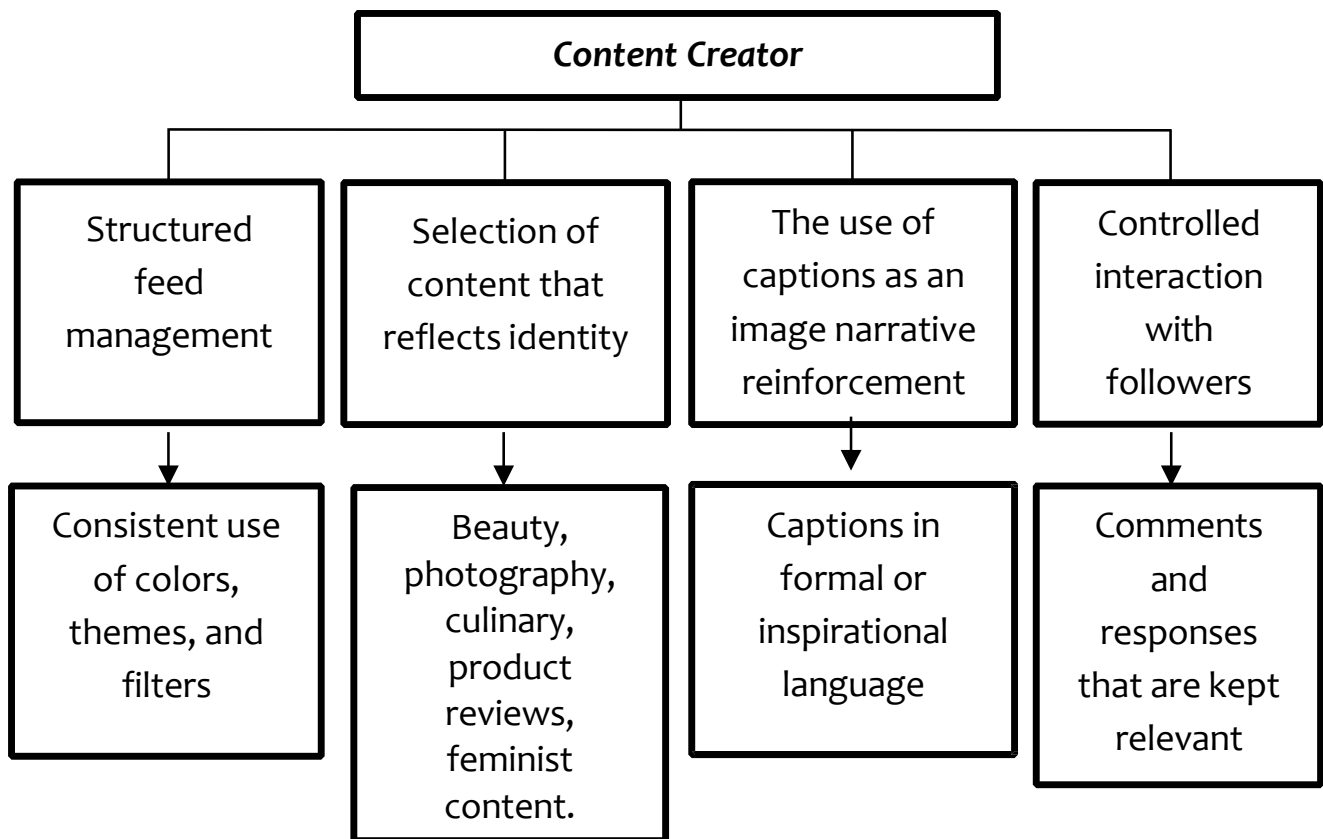
For content creators, Instagram accounts are not just a medium to share daily moments, but have evolved into digital "faces", a front stage to display the best version that is consciously designed, visually selected, and presented with a strategy. On Instagram, the first impression is created in a matter of seconds. Many content creators compile feeds like art actors who choose the best works in the gallery. Each post isn't just an image, it's about who they are, what's important, and how they want people to see. The front stage serves as a negotiation space between personal identity and audience expectations. Tucked into every piece of content is a message that they're creative, credible, worth following, and relevant. The

presentation does not stop at the visuals, but also the selection of captions, emojis, how to greet followers, and the upload time. Instagram is an area for the formation of digital identity, self-brand, as well as a reflection of professional and personal identity that is built sustainably.

Structured and aesthetic feed management

One of the important elements in the self-presentation of content creators on Instagram is the preparation of feeds as a visual representation of virtual identity. Feeds aren't just a random collection of photos, but rather "faces" that reflect their personality, values, and what they're passionate about. GRV informant (23 years old), a photography content creator, considers the display of

Schema 1. Forms of self-presentation for the front stage of the content creator



Source: Author's analysis (2023)

feeds crucial. It sets the order of the photos to be consistent in terms of color, lighting, and composition. Dark colors such as black dominate the uploads, creating a manly impression as a hallmark of GRV. He even often cancels posting schedules just because one image doesn't look "aesthetic."

Meanwhile, SYB (25 years old) is a content creator who focuses on feminist issues and self-care, which emphasizes more on the educational aspect of choosing an approach with a more functional aesthetic. While it doesn't focus too much on uniform color composition in feeds, it still maintains a professional and structured look. SYB's uploads are dominated by educational infographics, as well as quotes wrapped in simple designs. For SYB, structured feeds mean presenting credibility to show that they are serious about conveying their message, not just personal opinions. The following is an excerpt of the interview of the SYB informant (25 years old).

Selecting content that reflects values and identity

For content creators, every upload is not just visual or entertainment, but a reflection of the values and identity that they want to form in front of the audience. The selection of content becomes a symbolic selection, only certain aspects of life are displayed on the front stage. HN (27 years old), a culinary content creator, compiled an upload by describing a friendly figure and "close to the kitchen". He often shares cooking recipes that are easy for followers to follow, in a language style like talking to friends. In writing captions such as: "Simple cooking but makes rice fast (and accompanied by interesting emoticons)". Although relaxed, HN paid attention to the visual composition of the photo. The result is bright, neat, attractive, and appealing to followers.

Caption selection that strengthens the image narrative

In social media, Instagram visuals are the main primadonna, but the choice of captions is also important to clarify the message and narrative of the personal content creator. Captions are not just complementary, but part of a communication strategy that conveys the intent explicitly or implicitly. DA (24 years old), a beauty content creator, uses captions to build an image as a knowledgeable figure about skincare. She often educates about the long-term use of a product and products that are suitable for a woman's skin type.

Meanwhile, NVA (22 years old) is a content creator who focuses on product reviews (reviews). Emphasizing credibility and objectivity in every content he uploads, he often reviews various products with informative but still light word choices for his followers. He uses a caption to the point, objective, and informative style. He shares reviews with points to make them easy to read, accompanied by a neutral and transparent personal impression. Visual aesthetics are also displayed with neat product photos, supporting lighting that looks professional and reliable.

SYB (25 years old), a content creator who focuses on feminist issues and self-care, also often writes reflection captions or quotes about women. In one of her contents, she raised the theme of good social relationships: "Girls! build healthy, positive, and good connections and social relationships (love emoticons)". The caption gives the impression of not only sharing information, but also inviting thought, discussion, and action. The language used tends to be serious but communicative, reinforcing the image in favor of mental health.

Controlled interaction with followers

The interaction that occurs between content creators and followers is an important element in maintaining self-image on Instagram. The comment column, direct message feature, and story replay are not just ordinary chat places, but an important part of the front stage that must be well controlled. Although it seems relaxed, many interactions have gone through selection, filtering, timing, and style that are set to align with the image you want to build.

GRV (23 years old) photography content creator focuses on visual interaction and chooses comments that are relevant to style and self-confidence, ignoring body shaming. SYB (25 years old), a content creator of feminist and self-care issues, faces complex comments by replying that sparks healthy discussion and limits negative comments using privacy features. DA (24 years old), a beauty content creator, uses interaction with followers as an additional educational space. Be careful to give answers with disclaimers. The entire interaction is strategically selected and directed, so that the front stage remains under control and supports image management.

Backstage practice and content management

Behind every Instagram content creator upload that looks natural and spontaneous, there is a long process behind the scenes. This is called the "backstage" which in Goffman's dramaturgy is a space not intended for public consumption. In the context of Instagram content creators, the boundaries between the front and back stages are often blurred. The backstage is divided into two main forms: the personal space (real life) and the preparation space (content production strategy and emotion management).

For content creators, the backstage is not only a workspace full of strategies ranging from visual, technical, to emotional, but also part of real life, personal relationships, daily routines, and personal times that are never shown. The findings of the five content creators show that what is shown is the result of a rigorous selection, not a comprehensive representation of their lives. Real life is actually a source of pause, perspective, and inspiration to return to the stage.

Personal life behind the scenes

In Goffman's dramaturgy, the backstage is the space in which the individual relinquishes his or her social role. For content creators, a personal life that isn't shown on Instagram is the most authentic backstage. Field findings show that all informants have a firm separation between digital personas and their real lives.

Furthermore, this personal life becomes a space to deal with feelings that do not have a place on the front stage, such as anxiety, tiredness, disappointment, and even loss. Some of the informants also mentioned that moments such as crying, getting angry, or feeling like failures were always kept to themselves, because they felt that not all emotions needed to be consumed by the audience.

Emotional management and social stress

Building an image on social media requires not only technical and aesthetic skills, but also emotional strength. Behind the cheerful look, content creators keep an emotional burden. The boundaries between the front and back stages are often blurred. Even when not performing, creators still think about audience expectations, algorithms, and the impact of absenteeism. NVA (22) admitted that she had experienced

digital fatigue, not because of a lack of ideas, but pressure to continue to "exist" to maintain existence. He feels that he must always be present, otherwise the engagement will decrease. This creates a conflict between the need for rest and guilt.

The pressure also comes from public expectations. Creators are required to appear friendly, consistent, relevant, while maintaining the quality of uploads. GRV (23) made disparaging comments that made him question the validity of his work. He must still look fit and fun even though he is dropping. To cope with the pressure, SYB (25) filters comments, replies to only constructive ones, and uses the "restrict" or "mute" feature. She also does a social media detox for self-care, although she realizes that not all creators can do it because it has an impact on income.

The stress experienced is not only emotional, but also economic. Emotion management is an important skill for creators to remain stable. The back stage is not just a strategy room, but a place to process pressure and rediscover the reason for working.

Content production management

Content creators who seem spontaneous actually go through a complex and planned process on the backstage, including ideas, reshoots, editing, color adjustments, captions, and upload times, showing that the backstage functions as a professional and personal space to prepare impressions according to the image that is built.

DA (24) beauty content creator has a weekly upload schedule, adjusting trends, salary moments, brand promos, or red dates as an adaptation to the digital market cycle. He said, "I usually prepare content for one week, if there is a collaboration product from my brand, it will definitely match the time. For example, at the end of the month or the beginning of the month, people usually shop. So, the content can be more appropriate."

HN (27), a culinary content creator, conducted kitchen experiments, setting cooking duration, lighting, camera position, and retakes many times to make the visuals aesthetic, while GRV (23), a photography content creator, emphasized the importance of upload time and always being ready when the upload schedule is overtime, showing that the content production process involves technical preparation and a mature time strategy.

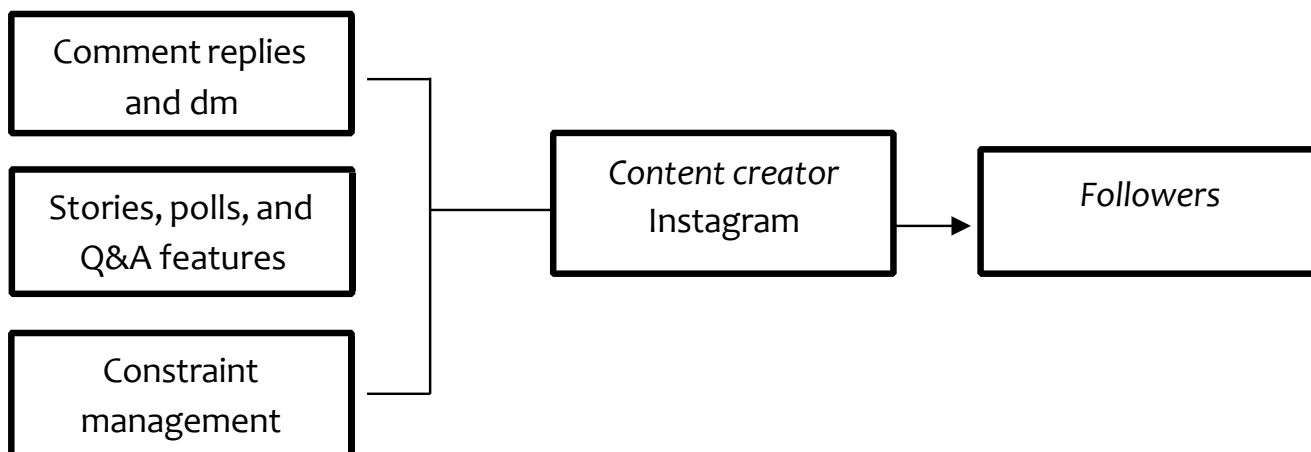
Furthermore, content production demands business meticulousness. For creators who work with brands, there are professional aspects such as deadlines, content revisions, employment contracts, and performance metrics (insights). Content production management is not just a creative activity, but also professional work that involves strategy, emotions, and image negotiation. The more refined the front stage displayed, the more complex the work behind the scenes.

Interaction with followers

Interactions on Instagram are now two-way, where content creators strategically reply to comments, messages, polls, and Q&A to build emotional attachment, loyalty, and maintain a front-stage image. Followers' responses through likes, comments, and criticism help shape the creator's image, while their involvement can grow into a community or fanbase that supports the creator's reputation and social position. Thus, the relationship between creators and followers is mutually formive, positive, and constructive. Content creators try to build positive and constructive relationships with followers in several ways:

1. Selectively selected reply to comments and direct messages
2. Use of stories features for spontaneous interactions, polls, and Q&A

Schema 2. Interaction with followers and image management strategies



Source: Author's analysis (2023)

3. Management of follower restrictions to maintain the quality of interaction and image.

Special findings based on content type and content creator characters

From the results of observations and in-depth interviews conducted by researchers, it was found that the self-presentation strategies carried out by content creators are greatly influenced by the type of content they produce and the character they have. Although all of the informants showed an effort to manage their impressions and maintain their digital image, the approach they chose was highly variable and could not be equalized. Each informant shows various strategies in managing Instagram accounts that are tailored to their respective focuses and goals. GRV (23 years old) and NVA (22 years old) emphasize visual aesthetics and professionalism through structured content, optimal lighting. Meanwhile, SYB (25 years old) and HN (27 years old) emphasize education and creativity by presenting relevant and interesting content, such as educational carousels about mental health and feminism, as well as recipe creations with a familiar and creative approach.

Meanwhile, DA (24 years old) combines elements of entertainment and personal authenticity through expressive style, the use of humor, and sharing personal experiences in stories so that the audience can get to know the authentic side of him. Thus, the management of the Instagram accounts of these content creators is carried out in a planned and strategic manner to build a consistent, attractive, and relevant image for the audience.

In Instagram, the content creator's identity is built through a dynamic process that involves adaptation, interaction with the audience, and the management of the front stage (the content shown) and the backstage (private space). The two stages are not always separate, as creators face tensions between digital personas and personal lives. Interactions with followers affect how they maintain their image, set boundaries, and understand the identity they show. This chapter discusses social performance on Instagram, exploration of the front and back stages, and managing impressions related to real life and follower response.

For Instagram content creators, self-presentation is a planned social performance, where Instagram functions as an active stage to display a pre-planned image.

This concept of self-presentation is in line with the dramaturgy developed by Erving Goffman, where social life is understood like a performance stage, individuals will act as actors who manage impressions to influence their audience. This is done by selecting content that takes into account audience reactions, algorithms, and visual trends. The front stage features curated content with consistent color tones, speaking styles, narratives, and expressions, while the backstage holds unpublished fatigue, editing, and personal aspects. In this luxury performance, content creators play the role of actors as well as directors, negotiating authenticity and public expectations to build relationships, reputation, and engagement, so that the digital identity displayed is a strategic and convincing "version of themselves".

Unlike interactions that occur directly in the real world, interactions on social media allow users to delay, edit, and even delete before finally "uploading" something in front of the audience. The front stage of content creators on Instagram is structured through feeds, stories, reels, captions, and interaction with selectively selected audiences. Social media allows them to postpone, edit, or delete content before it is published, so that only image-appropriate versions of themselves are visible. Audiences act as validators through likes, comments, and shares, which influence how creators maintain their image, shape public perception, and adjust their subsequent social performance.

On the other hand, the backstage is a space to balance digital imagery with personal life. Content creators' structure frontstage performance while maintaining an authentic side of the backstage, choosing what is shown to be consistent with the persona being built. Interacting with followers through comments, mentions, or reposts creates emotional attachment and social feedback that influences subsequent

content strategies. Thus, digital identities are formed relationally and strategically, the result of negotiations between the real self, the image constructed, the audience's response, and the platform's algorithm.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and analysis of the discussion that has been presented, the conclusion in this analysis is that the identity of digital content creators on Instagram is the result of a social performance that is consciously and planned, where visual content, communication styles, narratives, and facial expressions are chosen to build self-image on the front stage, while personal life and emotional fatigue are managed on the back stage as a private space. Interaction with followers through comments, direct messages, and other forms of engagement helps shape identity, creates one-way emotional connections, and influences the direction of the content and persona displayed. The boundaries between the front and back stages are fluid, creating tension and potential social fatigue, so that the identities displayed are not pure reflections of the self, but the result of personal strategies, algorithmic pressures, the need to always connect with the audience, and the process of selection, negotiation, and social strategy that continues in the digital ecosystem.

For researchers and academics, this research can be the basis for the development of dramaturgy studies in the digital age, with a focus on algorithm performance, image relations and digital ethics, as well as cross-platform comparative research such as TikTok, YouTube, or Twitter. An interdisciplinary approach between sociology, communication, and media studies can also enrich analysis and provide a more critical and contextual perspective.

For content creators, this research is a reflection to realize that self-presentation

activities on social media are not only about creativity, but also involve emotional pressure and burden. It is important for them to maintain a balance between personal and digital lives and manage their image to remain authentic and psychologically healthy. For the general public and social media users, this study emphasizes that the content displayed on social media is a pre-selected front stage. This awareness is important so that users understand that the digital version is not a perfect representation, so it can reduce feelings of inferiority, FOMO, and other social pressures.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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