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Consumer Perceptions of Local Food Through a Multidimensional Proximity Approach

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Abstract: A theoretical framework is developed to better understand consumer perceptions of local food through a multidimensional proximity approach. While local food is frequently defined by its geographical closeness, such definitions often overlook its emotional, relational, and value-driven aspects. In response to this gap, we build on Eriksen's (2013) proximity theory—encompassing geographic, relational, and value proximity—and integrate insights from construal level theory (CLT), which explains how psychological distance influences consumer thinking and decision-making. The conceptual model was constructed by combining findings from the literature with exploratory qualitative research (Laszlo and Wahlen, 2024). It organizes consumer-relevant attributes of local food into three broad categories: systematic benefits (such as sustainability and innovation), region- or culture-specific attributes (such as identity and tradition), and trust-related factors (such as perceived quality and transparency). These categories are then linked to the three proximity dimensions. Value proximity relates to perceived product benefits, including health, quality, and environmental impact. Relational proximity reflects interpersonal trust and social connectedness, while geographic proximity emphasizes spatial closeness and local identity. By clearly delineating these dimensions and their associated consumer perceptions, this framework contributes to theoretical clarity in local food studies and offers practical guidance for marketing, policymaking, and food system design. It provides a refined lens to explore and communicate the complex values consumers associate with local food.

Keywords: Consumer perception, Local food, Proximity, Consumer studies

Introduction

Ensuring the sustainability of food systems has become one of the most pressing global challenges, as current systems contribute to severe environmental, economic, and social problems (Willett et al., 2019; Gerten et al., 2020). Industrialised and globalised food supply chains have been widely criticised for their negative externalities, such as greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and social inequalities. As a response, alternative food networks, particularly short food supply chains (SFSCs) and local food systems (LFSs), have gained growing attention in both policy and academic discourses (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Wesseler, 2022). These systems are often considered potential tools to promote sustainability, food security, and rural resilience. However, while local food is often positioned as a more sustainable alternative, the concept itself remains ambiguously defined and inconsistently applied.

The term “local food” is commonly reduced to spatial proximity, focusing primarily on the physical distance between food production and consumption (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2017). Yet this interpretation fails to capture the full complexity of consumer attitudes, which are influenced not only by geography, but also by interpersonal trust, cultural identity, product quality, and perceived authenticity (Eriksen, 2013). Research increasingly shows that the perception of locality is multidimensional, encompassing relational and value-based dimensions alongside geography (Chicoine et al., 2022). Despite this, theoretical and empirical studies often treat local food as a monolithic concept, lacking a structured framework to reflect the diversity of consumer perspectives.

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This paper addresses this gap by developing a proximity-based conceptual framework that captures the multi-layered nature of how consumers perceive local food. Drawing on Eriksen's (2013) three domains of proximity—geographic, relational, and value—alongside construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), we propose an integrated model to organise the diverse attributes consumers associate with local food. Our aim is to provide a theoretically grounded structure that enhances conceptual clarity, offers practical relevance for food system actors, and supports more nuanced policy and marketing strategies.

Theoretical Background

Proximity

The concept of proximity is frequently invoked in discussions of local food systems, yet it is rarely defined with sufficient precision. Commonly associated with physical nearness, proximity is often treated as a purely geographical measure—the distance between where food is produced and where it is consumed. However, this reductionist view overlooks the complex socio-cultural, emotional, and psychological dimensions that shape how consumers interpret the notion of “local” (Torre, 2010; Eriksen, 2013). At its core, proximity refers to the nearness of entities in space, time, or relationship. While the spatial dimension—measured in kilometres or defined by political borders—is the most tangible, proximity in the context of food systems can also involve subjective perceptions of relational closeness, shared values, and familiarity (Boschma, 2005; Chicoine et al., 2022).

In food-related contexts, proximity has been used as a theoretical lens to understand how consumers evaluate food products, engage with producers, and make purchasing decisions (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018). For instance, a consumer may perceive a product as “local” not because it was produced nearby in a strictly spatial sense, but because it reflects regional identity, comes from a trusted producer, or aligns with their personal values such as environmental sustainability or traditional craftsmanship (Delind, 2006; Autio et al., 2013). These perceptions are not only cognitive but also emotional, often rooted in nostalgia, community belonging, or ethical concerns. The multidimensionality of proximity is increasingly acknowledged in food system research.

Recognizing proximity as a multi-layered concept is crucial to understanding why some food systems are more resilient, sustainable, and appealing to consumers than others. It also opens space for developing models that go beyond geographical definitions, incorporating the emotional and symbolic elements of food consumption. As will be explored in the following sections, scholars have proposed dual, triple, and multiple proximity frameworks to capture these nuances, while psychological theories such as construal level theory offer insight into how perceived distance shapes consumer decision-making.

Dual, Triple and Multiple Proximity Approaches

In response to the limitations of one-dimensional interpretations of proximity—typically focused on geographic distance—researchers have developed more complex theoretical frameworks that incorporate multiple forms of closeness. These frameworks acknowledge that “local food” is not only about where food comes from, but also about how it is produced, who produces it, and what it represents to consumers. Consequently, proximity has evolved from a spatial concept into a multidimensional analytical tool that includes social, cultural, and cognitive dimensions (Chicoine et al., 2022; Boschma, 2005).

Dual proximity approaches represent the simplest attempts to go beyond geographical distance. Hasanzade et al. (2022) argue that local food should be understood through at least two dimensions: geographical proximity, defined by the physical distance between production and consumption, and social proximity, which reflects the interpersonal connections and trust between consumers and producers. This framework draws on earlier distinctions by Torre and Rallet (2005), who contrasted geographical proximity with organized proximity—a construct based on shared norms, institutional arrangements, and frequent interaction. Similarly, studies by Fernández-Ferrín et al. (2018) and Denver et al. (2019) reinforce the importance of integrating both spatial and social dimensions to understand consumer preferences.

Triple proximity frameworks extend this approach by adding a third dimension, often referred to as value proximity. Eriksen (2013) formalised this tripartite model by identifying three central domains that shape local food systems: geographical proximity, which relates to the physical distance and spatial boundaries; relational proximity, which refers to direct and trust-based relationships between food system actors; and value proximity,

which encompasses shared meanings, ethical considerations, and product-related values such as quality, freshness, and authenticity. This model has been influential in subsequent studies on food consumer behaviour, and is particularly suited to examining perceptions where emotional and symbolic associations are just as important as spatial ones.

The rise of multiple proximity approaches reflects a further deepening of this conceptual field. Scholars such as Boschma (2005) have proposed up to five forms of proximity—geographical, organizational, cognitive, social, and institutional—primarily in the context of innovation and learning. Although not originally developed for food systems, these dimensions have inspired food researchers to consider broader relational and systemic aspects. Chicoine et al. (2022) provide one of the most comprehensive proximity frameworks applied specifically to food, identifying nine types: geographical, access, functional, process, price, identity, relational, cultural, and technological proximity. Their framework highlights how consumer perceptions of local food are shaped by a constellation of overlapping concerns—ranging from price and accessibility to cultural attachment and technological familiarity.

While multiple proximity models offer a rich and nuanced understanding, their complexity can hinder empirical application. In practical terms, distinguishing and measuring nine or more types of proximity within consumer research poses methodological challenges. For this reason, triple proximity models have become the most widely adopted in local food studies. These models strike a balance between theoretical sophistication and empirical usability, offering a robust yet manageable lens for examining consumer perceptions. The distinction between physical distance, social relationships, and shared values allows for a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of “localness.” However, to avoid conceptual inflation and ensure empirical applicability, theoretical parsimony remains important. This study adopts Eriksen’s triple proximity framework, as the most appropriate foundation for modelling consumer perceptions.

Construal Level Theory

While proximity theories offer structural insights into how consumers define and relate to local food, psychological models are equally essential for understanding how these proximities are mentally processed. One such framework is Construal Level Theory (CLT), which explains how people perceive, think about, and respond to objects or events based on their psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Psychological distance refers to how far something feels from the self—spatially, temporally, socially, or hypothetically—and influences whether individuals think about it in concrete or abstract terms. The greater the perceived distance, the more abstract the mental representation becomes; conversely, proximity leads to more concrete, detail-oriented thinking.

CLT is particularly relevant to local food research because the perception of locality often involves multiple forms of distance beyond physical space. A food product grown 100 kilometres away might feel “closer” to a consumer if it aligns with their values or they have personal trust in the producer—whereas food produced in the same town may feel psychologically distant if the consumer knows little about it. Trope and Liberman (2003) identified four key dimensions of psychological distance: spatial (e.g. where something is located), temporal (e.g. when it will happen), social (e.g. who is involved), and hypothetical (e.g. how likely it is to occur). These forms of distance shape whether consumers engage in low-level construals (concrete, detail-focused thinking) or high-level construals (abstract, value-based reasoning). This distinction has major implications for food-related decisions. When consumers perceive a product as “near” in any dimension, they tend to focus on its tangible features—such as freshness, taste, and price. When it is perceived as “distant,” however, attention shifts to symbolic qualities—such as ethical sourcing, sustainability, or innovation (Bae, 2020; Yao et al., 2021).

CLT also informs how local food messages should be framed. Marketing and policy communication can be tailored to match the audience's psychological distance. For instance, messaging that emphasises concrete attributes (e.g., “picked this morning”) may resonate better with consumers who perceive the product as close, while abstract appeals (e.g., “support sustainable agriculture”) may be more effective when distance—spatial or relational—is greater (Trope et al., 2007; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). This theoretical insight is critical in the context of local food, where producers and promoters aim to reduce perceived distance in order to increase consumer trust and engagement.

CLT complements proximity theory by offering a dynamic lens: while proximity theory maps the structural dimensions of “localness,” CLT helps explain how consumers interpret and prioritize these dimensions based on subjective perceptions of distance. For example, a consumer might cognitively recognise the geographic

proximity of a farm, but only develop a strong preference for its products if relational or value proximity is also perceived as close. Conversely, psychological distance in any one dimension may override the benefits perceived in another. In this study, CLT is used as a complementary theoretical tool that enhances the interpretation of proximity dimensions. It helps explain why consumers interpret similar proximities differently and why emotional and symbolic associations often outweigh physical measures of distance. Together with Eriksen's (2013) proximity theory, CLT provides a robust foundation for modelling the complex, layered nature of consumer perceptions of local food.

Method

The development of the theoretical framework presented in this paper followed an integrative and iterative process that combined insights from the literature with findings from exploratory qualitative research. The aim was to construct a model that reflects the multidimensional nature of consumer perceptions of local food while remaining grounded in existing theoretical foundations.

Approach to Theoretical Model Development

The initial phase involved a thematic review of literature related to local food. This process focused on identifying core attributes associated with local food, such as healthiness, tradition, ethnocentrism, and support for local producers etc. These attributes were initially grouped using Eriksen's (2013) proximity framework, which distinguishes between geographic, relational, and value proximity. However, during the classification process, an alternative logic emerged based on how consumers naturally associate these attributes. This prompted the addition of a second layer of grouping: systematic benefits and innovation, region- or culture-specific attributes, and trust-related factors.

To refine and validate the preliminary model, an exploratory focus group was conducted on 14 November 2023. The session involved six German doctoral students specialising in food-related research. Participants shared their interpretations of local food and reflected on the relevance of the proposed attributes. Their feedback led to the addition of new items and structural adjustments that improved the coherence and applicability of the model.

Data Sources and Tools

The conceptual model was developed using three key inputs:

- A focused literature review on proximity theories and local food perceptions,
- Qualitative insights from the German focus group,
- Informal academic feedback obtained through conference discussions, where the model was presented and debated.

These sources contributed to a more nuanced and practically relevant theoretical structure, combining academic grounding with field-based reflection.

Categorization Logic

While the model remains anchored in Eriksen's (2013) three proximity dimensions, the classification of local food attributes evolved to include a second layer of interpretation based on consumer relevance:

- **Systematic benefits and innovation:** attributes contributing to broader sustainability goals, e.g. fewer additives, environmentally conscious practices.
- **Region-/culture-specific attributes:** characteristics tied to heritage, identity, and tradition.
- **Trust-related factors:** perceptions related to product safety, transparency, and quality.

This dual-layer structure allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how proximity is perceived by consumers and how different values interact within their interpretation of "local" food.

This paper focuses exclusively on the theoretical development of the proximity-based framework. Although a validated consumer scale and empirical testing were subsequently carried out, these aspects are addressed in a separate phase of the research and are not reported here. The intention of the current work is to provide conceptual clarity and to offer a foundation for future empirical investigations, policy development, and practical application in food system design and communication

Results

Approach to Theoretical Model Development

This section presents the conceptual outcome of the theory-building process: a structured framework that organises consumer perceptions of local food based on proximity theory. The model is grounded in Eriksen's (2013) tripartite proximity structure—geographic, relational, and value proximity—but introduces a second layer of classification to reflect how consumers naturally interpret and prioritise different attributes. This dual-structured approach offers greater explanatory power by recognising not only where or how proximity is experienced, but why certain attributes matter to consumers. The initial proximity-based grouping emerged from a literature-driven and qualitatively informed process. As consumers associate local food with a wide range of values—such as trust, cultural identity, or sustainability—three overarching categories were identified: Systematic benefits and innovation; Region- or culture-specific attributes; Trust-related factors. Each of these groups cuts across all three proximity dimensions and captures distinct but interrelated drivers of consumer perception.

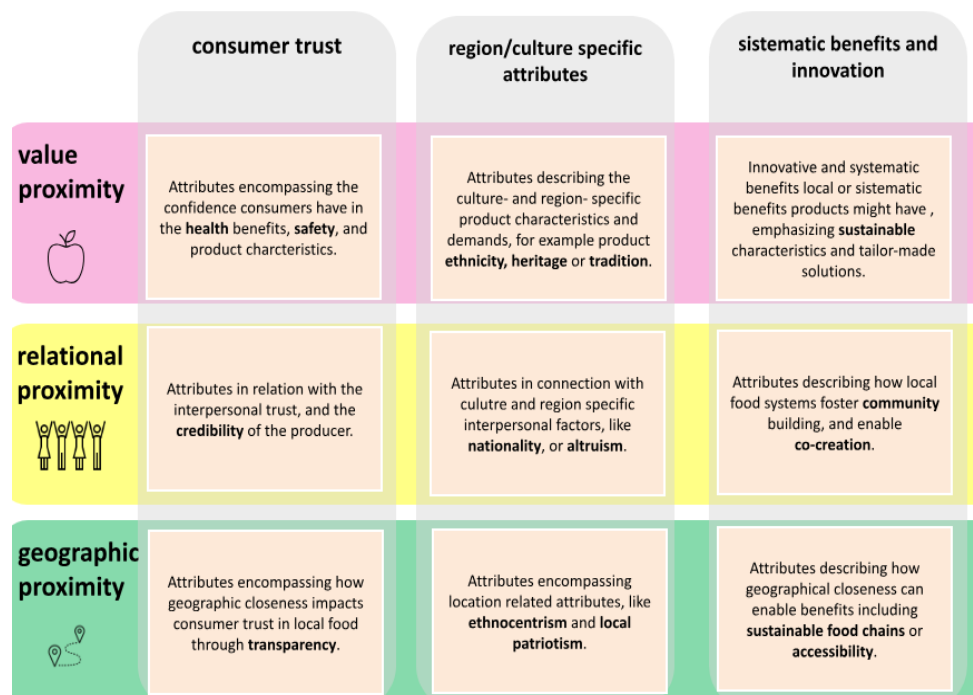


Figure 1. The new theoretical concept for the consumer perception of local food
Source: Self-edited figure

Value Proximity

Value proximity refers to the extent to which a product aligns with consumer expectations regarding health, safety, environmental performance, and quality. It encompasses intrinsic product characteristics that are often evaluated before or during consumption. In the model, value proximity is linked to three types of consumer-relevant attributes.

- Trust-related: Consumers often associate local food with safer, healthier, and higher-quality options. Trust is rooted in the perceived transparency and traceability of these products, which increases confidence in their benefits.

- Region-/culture-specific: Certain product characteristics evoke local identity, tradition, and cultural memory. Examples include traditional recipes, familiar flavours, and packaging associated with regional symbols or storytelling.
- Systematic benefits: Local food is perceived to contribute to broader goals such as sustainability or innovation, including the use of fewer additives, environmentally conscious practices, and more “natural” production methods.

Relational Proximity

Relational proximity captures the quality and intensity of interpersonal and institutional relationships in the food system. It includes face-to-face contact, social embeddedness, and emotional connection between consumers and producers.

- Trust-related: Personal familiarity with producers fosters trust and loyalty. Local food systems often involve direct sales, transparent supply chains, and repeated interactions, which reduce perceived risk.
- Region-/culture-specific: Consumers may identify with producers based on shared cultural background or values. Altruism, national or regional pride, and a sense of social solidarity can all influence relational closeness.
- Systematic benefits: From a social systems perspective, local food initiatives are seen to build community, enable co-creation, and foster stronger consumer–producer and consumer–consumer ties. These relational dynamics can be a source of innovation and mutual support.

Geographic Proximity

Geographic proximity refers to the physical distance between the place of production and the place of consumption. It remains a key anchor in consumer definitions of “local” food but interacts with other forms of proximity in shaping perceptions.

- Trust-related: Physical closeness may enhance perceived transparency in sourcing, logistics, and production methods. Shorter distances are often equated with fresher products and fewer unknowns in the supply chain.
- Region-/culture-specific: Ethnocentrism and local patriotism play a role in shaping attitudes toward geographically close products. Consumers may prefer food from their own region due to a sense of identity and familiarity.
- Systematic benefits: Geographically proximate food systems are seen as more sustainable, due to reduced transport emissions, more efficient logistics, and increased resilience in times of supply chain disruption.

This theoretical framework expands on Eriksen’s (2013) proximity model by mapping the three proximity types against three consumer-oriented value categories, resulting in a flexible and multi-layered conceptual structure. Rather than treating proximity dimensions as isolated variables, the model highlights their interplay with trust, identity, and systemic thinking—reflecting the real-life complexity of how consumers define and value “local food.”

Discussion

The proximity-based framework developed in this study provides better understanding how consumers perceive local food beyond traditional geographic definitions. By integrating Eriksen’s (2013) tripartite proximity theory with thematically grouped consumer values, the model offers a multidimensional lens that more accurately reflects the complexity of consumer decision-making in alternative food systems. One of the key contributions of this model is its ability to account for the layered meanings that consumers assign to local food. Rather than focusing solely on distance, the framework acknowledges that trust, cultural identity, and perceived systemic benefits all shape how proximity is interpreted. This aligns with previous findings that emphasize the symbolic, relational, and emotional dimensions of food preferences (Autio et al., 2013; Delind, 2006; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2017). By identifying the three consumer-oriented groupings—trust-related attributes, region- or culture-specific elements, and systematic benefits—the model adds explanatory depth and bridges theoretical insights with real-world consumer behaviour.

Importantly, the model highlights how proximity dimensions interact rather than operate in isolation. For instance, geographic closeness may enhance trust only when supported by relational or value proximity. A product from a nearby location will not be perceived as “local” if it lacks transparency or cultural relevance. This layered logic challenges simplified assumptions in both academic and policy discourses that often equate local food with spatial closeness alone (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). The framework also aligns with construal level theory, which suggests that psychological distance influences the mental representation of products (Trope & Liberman, 2003). In this model, relational and value proximity function as mechanisms that reduce psychological distance, making local food more tangible, trustworthy, and personally relevant. This insight has implications for how proximity dimensions can be mobilised in consumer communication and local food marketing strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, the model contributes to proximity studies by offering a structure that remains parsimonious yet flexible. While multiple proximity frameworks with five or more dimensions exist (e.g., Boschma, 2005; Chicoine et al., 2022), their empirical applicability is limited due to complexity. The model presented here retains the clarity of the triple proximity approach while integrating consumer-centric categories that emerged from qualitative research. At the same time, some limitations should be acknowledged. The framework is based on literature and exploratory validation, and although it was informed by focus group input and expert discussion, further empirical testing is needed to assess its applicability across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Moreover, while the three proximity dimensions provide a strong structural base, their internal overlaps suggest potential challenges in measurement and operationalisation. For instance, attributes such as “transparency” or “identity” may simultaneously belong to more than one proximity type, depending on the consumer’s perspective. Despite these limitations, the model provides a solid conceptual foundation for future empirical work and policy design. It also opens new avenues for exploring how different consumer groups interpret and prioritise proximity-related values, and how these perceptions shape their willingness to engage with local food systems.

Conclusions

This paper set out to develop a proximity-based conceptual framework that captures the diverse ways in which consumers perceive local food. Moving beyond narrow definitions based solely on geographic closeness, the study builds on Eriksen’s (2013) tripartite proximity model and enriches it by introducing a second classification layer grounded in consumer-relevant attributes. The resulting structure—linking geographic, relational, and value proximity to trust-related factors, region- or culture-specific attributes, and systematic benefits—offers a more nuanced and flexible interpretation of what “local” food means in contemporary consumption contexts. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its ability to integrate established proximity theory with consumer-centred insights. By bridging structural proximity concepts with psychological and cultural values, the framework provides an enhanced lens for analysing local food perceptions. This contributes to ongoing efforts in food system research to clarify conceptual ambiguities and better align theory with practice. From a practical perspective, the model offers guidance for designing more effective communication, marketing, and policy strategies. By understanding which proximity dimensions resonate with different consumer groups, stakeholders can tailor messages that reduce psychological distance and enhance trust, cultural connection, and perceived systemic value.

While it was developed through a structured and iterative process informed by qualitative exploration, it has yet to be validated through large-scale empirical testing. Additionally, the overlap between proximity dimensions and consumer attribute categories presents potential measurement challenges, particularly when translating the model into a quantitative instrument. Future research should focus on validating the framework through cross-cultural surveys and structural modelling approaches. Exploring how proximity dimensions interact with demographic factors, food types, or purchasing contexts could further refine the model’s applicability. Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine how shifts in social and environmental conditions—such as crises, technological innovations, or evolving consumer values—influence proximity perceptions over time. This study lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of consumer–food relationships through a proximity lens. It offers both a theoretical contribution to proximity literature and a conceptual foundation for applied work in sustainable food system development.

Recommendations

The theoretical framework developed in this paper has important practical implications for policymakers, food system actors, and researchers seeking to strengthen local food systems. By recognising that proximity is not limited to spatial distance but also encompasses relational and value-based dimensions, more nuanced and effective strategies can be designed to support consumer engagement, trust-building, and sustainable food practices.

For policymakers and local governments, one key recommendation is to move beyond administratively defined notions of “local food” and to acknowledge the broader set of meanings consumers associate with locality. Policies should reflect this complexity by supporting not only geographically close supply chains but also initiatives that foster relational proximity—such as farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture, and short supply chain programmes that promote transparency and direct interaction. Furthermore, communication campaigns should highlight value-based elements such as health, authenticity, and sustainability, which consumers frequently associate with local food.

Producers and practitioners in local food systems can also benefit from this framework by aligning their communication and branding strategies with the multidimensional nature of proximity. Emphasising trust-enhancing features—such as production transparency, low processing, and producer identity—can strengthen relational and value proximity, even in cases where geographic proximity is weaker. Narratives that reflect regional traditions, local culture, and community engagement can further increase perceived closeness and emotional attachment to the product. Building local food initiatives around these attributes may enhance consumer loyalty and reinforce the social functions of food systems.

For researchers and educators, the framework provides a useful tool for designing studies that account for the layered perceptions of proximity. Survey instruments, educational programmes, and intervention designs can be improved by integrating relational and value aspects alongside geographic considerations. Future research can build on this structure to explore how different consumer groups perceive and prioritise proximity dimensions, and how these perceptions affect food choices and sustainability-related behaviours. By adopting a multidimensional understanding of proximity, all stakeholders can contribute to the creation of more inclusive, resilient, and consumer-relevant local food systems. This approach acknowledges that “local” is not merely a spatial construct, but a set of meaningful relationships and shared values that shape how food is produced, consumed, and experienced.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

* The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS Journal belongs to the author.

Conflict of Interest

* The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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