

The significance of typography in the linguistic landscape during the Fascist period in Italy (1922–1943)

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the use of lettering and typeface in the linguistic landscape in Italy during the Fascist period (1922–1943), focusing on inscriptions on public buildings and the lettering used in propaganda posters and other materials. After a general introduction, some definitions, and an overview of Italian Fascism, the paper introduces the methodology employed, which consists first of an analysis of the lettering used in Fascist public writings and their link to ancient Rome on the one hand and modernity on the other, and second of a simple test carried out among a sample of students at Universiti Malaya (Malaysia) to investigate their perception of ‘Fascist’ fonts. There follows an analysis and discussion of the data, which leads to the conclusion that some of the ideas behind this right-wing movement seem to be portrayed by the specific lettering and fonts used. Finally, these conclusions are compared to those arrived at in previous research on fonts.

KEYWORDS: Fascism; fonts; inscriptions; lettering; linguistic landscape; typography

1. Introduction

Typography, i.e., the use of different typefaces and letterings in writing, particularly in the present age using electronic media, is not just a way to give a smart and attractive look to what is being written. Research has shown that it goes much deeper than that, as it can be symbolical and/or evocative and index something that goes beyond the meaning of the text. ‘Typography conveys ample and subtle meanings beyond its language-encoding function’, according to one dictum (Stöckl, 2005, p. 208), and ‘typeface variation does strongly affect the emotional information, or, in other words, the tone that accompanies the information’ according to another (Amare and Manning, 2012, p. 1). Specific fonts can even more subtly evoke feelings and moods; in Hyndman’s words (2016), ‘the different shapes and styles of the typefaces themselves stimulate responses independently of the words they spell out, and before we even read them.’ Some fonts can index or connote some specific products/company and even some specific country or historical period, in some cases without needing to read or even understand the contents of the message.

The relatively little research that has been carried out to date on the sociolinguistic significance of typography—see, for example, van Leeuwen’s (2005, 2006) seminal articles and the special issue of the *Journal of Social Semiotics* edited by Järlehed and Jaworski (2015)—has focused on contemporary examples. One previous article on the use of lettering for hippie and punk posters (Coluzzi, 2021) was the first to deal with ‘historical’ lettering, i.e., the lettering used in a specific period in the past, in that particular case the 1960s and 1970s. In the present article, a more remote past is going to be explored. To

discuss the significance of typography in the linguistic landscape, some of the letterings and typefaces used during the Fascist Era in Italy (1922–1943) will be examined, and reference will be made to one contemporary Italian neofascist group as well.

As a matter of fact, there are not and have never been any specific ‘official typefaces’ for Fascist writings, and a quick look at some of the public inscriptions and propaganda writings that can be found in history/art books or online (or on actual buildings and monuments in Italy) shows a relatively extensive gamut of lettering. However, close analysis seems to indicate that two main styles of lettering were popular at that time: one related to the ancient Roman world, and the other closer to modernist or even rationalist tendencies. These two tendencies in typography go hand in hand with the architectural styles popular during the Fascist Era: ‘The architectural itineraries [of Fascism] consist [...] of architectures that are very different from each other. Some of them exalt modernity, others tradition, and the architects who contributed to them follow opposite artistic ideas’¹ (Nicoloso, 2011). From about 1937 on, however, the classicist tendency takes over. In fact, it will be from the beginning of the works to build the E42² that Mussolini’s preferences ‘will favour increasingly the recovery of a Roman tradition’ (Nicoloso, 2011), highlighted, among other things, by ‘the creation of new urban centres [through which] the regime emphasized the continuity between Fascism and the Roman world’ (Bignami and Rusconi, 2012). Mussolini had in fact realized that: ‘As a matter of fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make the people believe that those architectures with such rational and abstract forms actually indicate a continuity between Fascism and ancient republican and imperial Rome’ (Nicoloso, 2011). Fascist classical architecture, however, would be ‘interpreted according to a modern concept’ (Nicoloso, 2011). We should add, however, that the Roman-looking letterings tended to be used for inscriptions on public buildings and monuments, whereas the more modern letterings were used more on posters and other print material. As far as Roman-looking lettering is concerned, we may also see it as an example of mimicry. It would not really be writing system mimicry as described, for example, by Sutherland (2015), as it would not be ‘the choice to make a text in one writing system superficially resemble text in another’ (Sutherland, 2015, p. 147), but rather making a text in one language (in this case Italian) resemble text in another language (Latin) by using a common lettering associated with the latter. This means that the mimicry is performed within the same script by using a font common in the language imitated, in this case, Latin as used in Roman times.

What this article aims to show is that these two broad types corresponded to the two main cultural leanings of Italian Fascism: traditionalism on the one hand and modernity on the other. This article also aims to show that the letterings themselves were not chosen randomly; their shape and style were indeed evocative, at least to an extent, of some features of Fascist ideology.

In the pages that follow, some definitions and an overview of Italian Fascism will be provided, followed by the methodology employed, which consists of both an analysis of the lettering used in Fascist writings and inscriptions and a test carried out among a sample of students at a Malaysian university to test their perception of ‘Fascist’ typefaces. This will be followed by an analysis and a discussion of the data, which has led to one main finding: some of the ideas behind this right-wing movement seem to be portrayed through the specific lettering used. In fact, the survey showed that ‘Fascist’ typefaces feature specific traits that may go beyond mere connotation, being linked to our mental processes and emotional responses. Finally, these conclusions will be compared to those arrived at in previous research on fonts,

¹ All translations from Italian are by the author.

² E42 refers to the buildings that were planned for the Universal Expo that was due to take place in 1942. In the end, only some of the full project was carried out.

particularly one carried out by Coluzzi (2021) on hippie and punk fonts in the linguistic landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. A short discussion on a contemporary neofascist movement, CasaPound, is also included to show the typographic continuity between Mussolini's Fascism and this movement and the process of enregisterment that Roman fonts (and to an extent modern Fascist fonts as well) have gone through in Italy.

2. Typography, fonts, and typefaces: Some definitions

Together with the non-technical term 'lettering', these three terms are used rather interchangeably nowadays. However, the three terms really refer to three different yet related concepts. Whereas technically 'typography' 'refers to the process of design, production, and visual organization of letterforms (shape, size, spacing, etc.) to achieve "harmony" and "legibility" despite the social sense of their use' (Järlehed and Jaworski, 2015, p. 117), we will adopt Sue Walker's (2001, in Järlehed and Jaworski, 2015, pp. 117–118) more wide-ranging definition of the term that subsumes "'writing" in all possible modes of production and technologies such as handwriting (including the use of "writing" instruments such as pens, as well as inscribing, scrawling, or scratching), mechanical (printing), and the digital media'. On the other hand, a font usually refers to the digital, computerized form of a particular typeface. Each typeface may have a family of several fonts (bold, italic, condensed, semibold italic, etc.), each weight and style on the page a little different (Garfield, 2012), but 'in common parlance, we use font and typeface interchangeably' (Garfield, 2012). Hyndman (2016) confirms that 'the two terms are becoming increasingly interchangeable.' In this article, these terms are used interchangeably; the general term 'inscription' is used to specifically refer to writing inscribed in a monument or building.

The modern typefaces shown and discussed in this article were originally handmade by skilled typographers. The letterings appearing on buildings, however, were sculpted on marble and other materials or shaped in concrete. The typefaces discussed here are rarely used nowadays, but they are still quite visible in Italy on many buildings built during Mussolini's time. They were mostly 'display' typefaces, to be found on buildings, monuments, posters, magazines, and newspapers. Interestingly, as we will see, some of the Fascist letterings have been used recently by the neofascist group CasaPound for their posters and even for the inscription on their headquarters building in Rome, and on the cover of a handful of books on Fascism.

3. Italian Fascism

Even though many of the ideas and tenets of Fascism existed before the latter took power in Italy after the First World War, it could be affirmed that Fascism was born in Milan, Italy, on 23 March 1919, when Benito Mussolini called a meeting to inaugurate the *Fasci di Combattimento* (Fascist Combat). Mussolini (1883–1945) was an ex-socialist and war veteran, the son of a small-town blacksmith, who had left the Socialist Party because it was against Italy entering the First World War.

There were no real and clear ideologies in the program of the *Fasci di Combattimento* that was drafted a few weeks after this event, just a mixture of 'nationalism [...], republicanism, anticlericalism' and endorsement of 'women's suffrage, and social reform' (Passmore, 2014). As Fascism never had a clear and established ideology behind it, some of these programmatic points were later abandoned to be replaced by others. As a matter of fact, the ideas underpinning Fascism changed over time according to the prominence of the different components of the party, among other reasons, but most of the time even opposite ideas managed to coexist, supported by the extremely disparate social and political groups and personalities that were part of the Fascist regime. In any case, what Mussolini and Fascist leaders kept

reiterating was that Fascism was eminently pragmatic: it was action before theory. In spite of the heterogeneity of currents within Italian Fascist ideology, however, Griffin (1998) sees a common core of two components, which he identifies as ‘the myth of palingenesis (rebirth, renewal) and, second, an organic, illiberal conception of the nation that celebrates the collective energies of the “people” (ultra-nationalism)’.

On 28 October 1922, the March on Rome was staged. It was led by Mussolini, who was appointed prime minister by King Victor Emmanuel III. This marked the beginning of the Italian Fascist *ventennio* (twenty years), even though the out-and-out dictatorship began three years later, on 3 January 1925.

Fascism, in general, is normally said to show some or all of the following features: ultranationalism, charismatic leadership, dictatorship, racism, antisemitism, a single party, paramilitarism, violence, actual or threatened, corporatism, a totalitarian ideology, anticapitalism, antisocialism, anticommunism, antiliberalism, antiparlamentarianism, and anti constitutionalism (Passmore, 2014), and most or perhaps all of them were clearly present in Italian Fascism in one moment or another of its history.

As has been explained, there was no dominant Fascist ideology; Fascism never managed to produce its own specific political doctrine. It managed, however, to group together ‘reactionaries and modernists, Catholics and atheists, nationalists and statalists, corporativists and trade unionists’ (Tarquini, 2016). But if there was no clear Fascist ideology, various ‘Fascist myths’ were clearly present: the myth of Mussolini, the myth of the state, the myth of Rome, and the myth of the new man (Tarquini, 2016). As far as Fascist art specifically is concerned, Schmid (2005, pp. 138–139) sums up the stylistic dimension of Fascism in five points: 1) Fascism is to a considerable extent a phenomenon of style; 2) Fascist aesthetics is not restricted to one specific style; 3) a very ambivalent attitude towards modernism can be observed—symbols from the past were recycled in new strength, e.g., the Myth of Ancient Rome; 4) Fascist art does not imitate reality, but creates reality; 5) Fascist aesthetics reinstates art in its pre-modern social function—art is not segregated from the public sphere and exiled to museums and exhibitions, but it has a clear pragmatic function. The use of specific typographic styles on monuments and posters is a suitable example of such Fascist aesthetics.

As already mentioned above, among all the different ideas and tendencies that made up Italian Fascism, two very different and, in a way, mutually exclusive currents seemed to prevail: a conservative one that tended to look back at the past (which was linked to the ‘myth of Rome’), and a modern one that oriented itself towards the future (related to the ‘myth of the new man’ or rebirth). The most popular display typefaces seem to have reflected these two tendencies.

After the Second World War, Italy became a democratic republic, but official and unofficial political movements that were more or less openly linked to Mussolini’s Fascism were established. Such movements range from the historical MSI to the most recent Fratelli d’Italia, which is now part of the Italian Government, and CasaPound. CasaPound is a small neofascist party (it only received a little over 300,000 votes at the General Elections in 2018) established in 2003. Together with some of the classic features of Fascism, particularly its racism, anticapitalism, antisocialism, anticommunism, and antiliberalism, CasaPound has characterized itself for its ‘*social activism*, i.e., [its] commitment to become a political challenger of the hardships of particular sectors of Italian society, starting from the devastated suburbs of the big cities and finishing with temporary and casual work’ (Germinario, 2018).

4. Data and methods

The methodology employed closely follows the one used by Coluzzi (2021) for his article on hippie

and punk fonts. To collect data for this paper, two main methods were used. To begin with, Fascist inscriptions were looked for online and in books on Fascist art and architecture; as a matter of fact, to my knowledge, no articles or books have ever been published specifically focusing on Fascist typography, and the available photos showing the letterings used in those times are rather limited. About 120 photos were collected that were found relevant (Bignami and Rusconi, 2012; Cresti, 2015; Nicoloso, 2011; Google Images). The analysis consisted of comparing the letterings and finding common elements. Only two typefaces were found repeatedly—one resembling ancient Roman lettering, and another one inspired by Art Deco, an artistic style that originally developed in France just before the First World War, and became very popular all over Europe and America in the 1920s and 1930s. Following this, fonts that looked as similar as possible to the most popular letterings observed were searched for on websites offering free fonts. Two fonts were identified as closely resembling the Roman type of inscriptions on the one hand (**Figure 1** and **Figure 2**), and the more modern-looking one on the other (**Figure 2** and **Figure 3**), which was clearly inspired by Art Deco. The Roman typeface was based on the common lettering used for inscriptions on monuments and buildings in ancient Rome and its empire; it is a serif font, and it uses the letter V to represent both the /v/ and the /u/ phonemes. On the other hand, Art Deco, or Style Moderne, was a ‘movement in the decorative arts and architecture that originated in the 1920s and developed into a major style in western Europe and the United States during the 1930s’:

The distinguishing features of the style are simple, clean shapes, often with a ‘streamlined’ look; ornament that is geometric or stylized from representational forms; [...]. Though Art Deco objects were rarely mass-produced, the characteristic features of the style reflected admiration for the modernity of the machine and for the inherent design qualities of machine-made objects (e.g., relative simplicity, planarity, symmetry, and unvaried repetition of elements) (Britannica, 2023).



Figure 1. Roman lettering on the building of Italian civilization in Rome.

STVDENTS OF THE WORLD
STUDENTS OF THE WORLD

Figure 2. Sentence and fonts used for the test.



Figure 3. Modern font on a poster advertising the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution ('XI' stands for the 11th year of the Fascist Era, 1932–1933).

The 'Fascist' lettering inspired by Art Deco is a sans-serif font, easily recognizable by the perfectly round and uniform O letter that contrasts with the rather narrow shape of the other letters, particularly the S that stands out for its slender shape, looking almost like a reversed J (see **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**). It is interesting to notice that these fonts were mostly used in Fascist Italy, as in Nazi Germany, for example, the prevalent lettering, particularly in the first period of the dictatorship, was Fraktur, a blackletter typeface. In other countries, the use of Art Deco fonts was hardly ever related to politics or the government.

After this first phase, a test was prepared for a sample of students to complete. Seventy-one undergraduate students aged between 19 and 24 in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics of Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (from the Chinese, Tamil, Arabic, Japanese, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and English programmes), the great majority female, were given a photocopy each with the same sentence written twice using the two different 'Fascist' fonts selected. As explained, there are various typefaces that can be connected to Italian Fascism, some quite different from the others. I opted for two fonts that could be downloaded free of charge from the Internet and closely resembled two of the most common letterings analyzed above, one more ancient Roman looking, quite similar to the well-known Trajan font (Fonts4free, 2023), and the other more modern looking, actually very similar to some Art Deco typefaces (Dafont, 2023). As the phrase had to be as neutral as possible and its meaning had to have nothing to do with Fascism, I decided on the phrase 'students of the world', partly because it includes both the V that replaced the U in the first font, and the perfectly round 'O' that characterizes the second font, but also because it did not include any letter that was not used in Latin. The two phrases were printed in the same size and colour (black) to prevent these two variables from influencing the perception of the students (see **Figure 2**). Participants were then given a few minutes to write down under each of the two sentences the adjectives (or any other words) that the font evoked.

All the words that were written by the students were then noted down, and they provided a general overview of the perception the students had looking at the two sentences. The rationale behind this test was to confirm that the kinds of fonts used could influence the students' perceptions and evoke similar images and feelings in the different participants. As a matter of fact, as the results show, these images and

feelings seem to match at least some aspects of the ideas and values of Fascism. The assumption was that the students would not recognize these fonts as Fascist, or even as Roman or Art Deco. As a matter of fact, these fonts have not undergone any process of ‘enregisterment’ in Malaysia, i.e., they have not acquired social meaning by being correlated to the specific social contexts where they were first noticed (Jaworski, 2015, p. 221). In spite of the worldwide cultural and economic flows that the Internet and globalization have made possible, various political, educational, and cultural factors have kept Malaysians away from most of the historical cultural developments that have taken place in the West and even in Asia, particularly if they happened before they were born. History as a subject in Malaysian schools only partially includes world events, focusing mostly on Malaysian and Islamic history. The art subject, on the other hand, only covers drawing and painting—no history whatsoever is included. Cultural programs on Malaysian television channels are few and far between and are hardly ever of a historical nature. The result is that the majority of young Malaysian students are not aware of most of the social, political, and cultural developments that took place in the Western world in the past, and they have hardly any idea of Italian Fascism, let alone of the typography it made use of. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that some cultural conventions might have transferred from Western popular culture. Hollywood, for example, reproduces very broad and overgeneralized symbolical messages, and a basic distinction between ‘classical/formal/traditional’ and ‘modern/creative/artistic’ styles could be one of them. In other words, the two styles discussed in this article (particularly the ancient Roman lettering, as the Art Deco one is very hard to come across these days) have become so deeply incorporated into Western culture that even those who have only superficial knowledge of it may still be able to differentiate them. In this case, the results of the test would simply show how strong these cultural conventions may be, even for people with such a different culture and history as in Malaysia. In spite of all this, the possibility that the shapes themselves might evoke some general feelings and ideas is compelling, particularly in light of the neuropsychological research on shapes described in the discussion section.

5. Results

Several different words and short phrases were noted by the respondents, but for this analysis, it was decided that only the words/phrases chosen by at least 5% of the students (i.e., at least four) would be taken into consideration. The results can be seen in **Tables 1** and **2**.

Table 1. Results of the test on Roman fonts.

Roman font (STVDENTS OF THE WORLD)	
Word/phrase	Occurrences
Formal	43
Neat	17
Serious	6
Elegant	6
Traditional	5
Boring	5
Easy to read	5
Common	4
Normal	4
Old	4

As can be observed in **Table 1**, some of the words/phrases are related to personal feelings, such as liking or disliking. However, I would like to draw attention to two of them, ‘traditional’ and ‘old’, as they seem to fit with the significance of Roman fonts and the Fascist fascination with the old Roman Empire. On the other hand, ‘formal’ (and perhaps ‘serious’) makes sense, too, as this lettering was used for inscriptions on public buildings.

Table 2. Results of the test on the modern fonts.

Modern (Art Deco) font (STUDENTS OF THE WORLD)	
Word/phrase	Occurrences
Informal	16
Attractive	11
Movies	10
Nice	10
Jurassic World/Park	9
Modern	7
Cute	7
Fun	7
Creative	5
Neat	5
Poster	5
Relax(ed)	4
Cartoons	4
Beautiful	4
Unique	4
Design(ing)	4

In **Table 2**, too, some of the words/phrases reflect the students’ personal taste, but it is very interesting that words such as ‘modern’ and ‘poster’ should be chosen, as they are quite indicative of, respectively, one of the main two trends of Fascism and of the means that were normally used to display messages written using this or similar fonts. Other adjectives (attractive, creative) highlight one of the purposes that this font was chosen for, i.e., to draw the attention of passersby. Interestingly, although it has nothing to do with Fascism, this font is to an extent similar to the one chosen for the Jurassic Park movies, and many students related it to these movies or to movies (or cartoons) in general.

6. Discussion

Lettering and fonts were as important as many other aspects of Fascist art. They were not restricted to one specific style, even though two main tendencies were present, as has been shown. One of these was related to ancient Rome, whose style of inscription was ‘recycled in new strength’ (Schmid, 2005, p. 139). Most importantly, letterings and fonts were found in ‘the public sphere’ and had ‘a clear pragmatic function’ (Schmid, 2005, p. 139).

Apart from examining Fascist lettering, one of the purposes of this study was to see whether the choice of fonts was totally arbitrary and random or whether it might have reflected in some way some aspects of Fascist ideology beyond enregisterment. The results of the simple test carried out among a sample of young people in Malaysia who know little to nothing about Italian Fascism seem to point to

the possibility that some elements in the fonts chosen may be somehow linked to something perceived as old and traditional (first font: the Roman world) or to something modern and suitable for public display, such as posters (second font: modernity). Even though the sample group is limited and these conclusions cannot be generalized, they are interesting and clearly in line with research on the perception of fonts such as that carried out by Morrison (1986), Brumberger (2003), Juni and Gross (2008), and Koch (2011), which indicates that the emotional response to fonts tends to be different for each font and consistent among different respondents in a statistically significant way. What most research has not shown to date, however, is the possible link between specific font styles and the ideas of the groups that have made their use emblematic beyond enregisterment, i.e., among people who do not know the social and historical context where the fonts were used. Previous research on hippie and punk letterings (Coluzzi, 2021), for which a test similar to the one used here was carried out, achieved results similar to those of the research cited above in that it showed that different fonts seemed to evoke different images and feelings, many of which can be related to the ethos and ideas of the juvenile subcultures that used them for their concert posters. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the results of the test might just point to the subtle influence of Western popular culture, particularly cinema, even in this part of the world³.

It is extremely interesting that a neofascist group such as CasaPound should choose a Roman font for some of its writings, particularly for the inscription on its headquarters in Rome (see **Figure 4**). However, interestingly enough, it is a Roman font with strong modern features, almost a cross between the two fonts used for the tests above. In this case, ancient Roman fonts have come to be emblematic of (or to connote) Fascism, at least its Italian strand, in the same way as Gothic letterings (Blackletter) have come to be emblematic of Nazism (and, more recently, heavy metal music); in short, they have acquired social meaning—in Italy and perhaps in the West more generally—by being correlated to the specific social contexts where they were first noticed, i.e., ancient Rome. It seems as if even the modern Art Deco font shown in this article has gone through a degree of enregisterment, as the fonts used on the cover of a few books on Fascism, such as Eco's *How to Spot a Fascist (Il fascismo eterno)* (2020), clearly show (**Figure 5**).



Figure 4. Inscription on CasaPound's main headquarters in Rome.

³ I would like to thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for suggesting this.

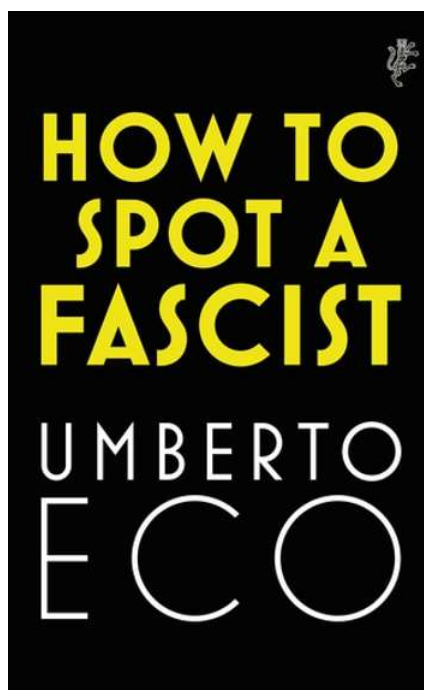


Figure 5. Cover of Umberto Eco's book featuring Fascist Art Deco fonts.

7. Conclusions

As has been shown in this article, fonts are important elements of any written text, and they were as important in Fascist Italy as they are today, in Italy as well as in any literate society.

What this article has tried to show, then, is, first of all, that Fascism had its own typefaces, even though they were not exactly original (like Fascist ideas) and were as fluid as the regime's political ideas. Secondly, it has tried to demonstrate that the choice of a particular font may not be arbitrary, in that at least some of its features may somehow and very subtly reflect and symbolize some elements of the ideas/ideology/ethos of the particular individual/group/company that decides to adopt it to convey its messages, whether they are political, commercial, or of a different nature. Even though in the case of Roman typography the choice was more direct and rational, as the ancient Roman Empire was a model Italian Fascism looked up to, and in the case of Art Deco the choice was understandable since the latter was rather fashionable at the time, these choices may have had some deeper reasons. As the test carried out seems to show, Roman fonts evoke formality, tradition, and antiquity, among other things, whereas the modern 'Art Deco' font calls to mind informality, modernity, and creativity, among other things. Obviously, more research will be needed to confirm this relationship, but this article and the one on hippie and punk typography (Coluzzi, 2021) seem to be pointing in that direction.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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