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Comparative Content Analysis of Representation of Women in Select Hollywood and Nollywood Films

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ABSTRACT

Background: The issues of sex, gender and portrayal have continued to be topics of global concern. Many studies have been done in this area but there remains a gap on the disparities in the representation of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films, focusing on *Widows* (Hollywood) and *Sugar Rush* (Nollywood).
Objectives: The study investigated how women were portrayed in these films through the lens of physical appearance, speech and dialogue, and through the roles they played.
Method: Adopting a qualitative research framework, the study employed textual\pictorial analysis of six characters and interviewed six Law undergraduate students to explore the nuances of female representation in the two film industries.
Results: The findings reveal that Hollywood presents women in a more progressive light, portraying them as confident, assertive, and less objectified. Female characters in *Widows* were not shown in sexually revealing outfits, and their nudity was not exposed, aligning with contemporary feminist ideologies. Conversely, the portrayal of women in *Sugar Rush* reflects more traditional and patriarchal stereotypes, with characters often depicted in sexually suggestive clothing, objectified, and framed as dependent on male characters.
Conclusion: The study concludes that the Hollywood presents women in a more dignified manner than the Nollywood.
Unique Contribution: The study has offered new insight into the increasing negative portrayal pattern of women in Nollywood and the effect on female audience perception. Hopefully, movies directors, producers and communication experts will find this fresh insight useful in the future.
Key Recommendation: The study commends that the establishment establishment of a global film regulatory and monitoring body is recommended so as to look into the salient negative depiction of both gender and other group of people stereotyped.

Keywords: Hollywood, Nollywood. Widows, Sugar Rush

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in film has been a topic of scholarly interest for decades, particularly as media play a powerful role in shaping societal norms and perceptions. In the industry, women's portrayals often reflect broader cultural, social, and gender dynamics, with significant differences observed across various film industries. Hollywood, the global film powerhouse, and Nollywood, the world's second-largest film industry by volume, offer distinct perspectives on gender portrayals. While Hollywood has been subject to intense feminist critique, leading to gradual improvements in the representation of women, Nollywood continues to grapple with deeply ingrained stereotypes that often reflect patriarchal Nigerian cultural norms (Onuzulike, 2008; Mahmood, 2013).

In Hollywood, significant strides have been made to present women as independent, intelligent, and capable characters. Research indicates that films with women as central figures are gaining prominence, and the portrayal of women has shifted from passive, objectified figures to confident, assertive individuals (Irigoyen, 2017). The visibility of these shifts underscores the growing alignment of Hollywood with feminist ideologies, as women are increasingly cast in roles that challenge traditional gender norms (Aromona, 2016).

Conversely, Nollywood has been slower to evolve in its portrayal of women. Despite the massive popularity of the industry across Africa, women in Nollywood films are still predominantly portrayed through the lens of patriarchal stereotypes. Women are often depicted as overly sexualized figures, dependent on men, and portrayed as objects of voyeurism, reinforcing harmful gender roles. Studies, such as Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle (2019), Okoro, Nwafor, & Odoemelam, (2014) and Aligwe, Nwankwo, & Nwafor, (2017) indicate that there is little evidence of change in Nollywood's approach to gender representation, with women frequently depicted in sexually revealing clothing and fulfilling roles that accentuate traditional, subservient narratives.

Research Questions

1. What are the pattern of portrayal of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?
2. What are the similarities of portrayal pattern of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?
3. What are the differences in portrayal pattern of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

The study was anchored on the Objectification theory as developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). the study argues that women in patriarchal societies are frequently reduced to their bodies or body parts, which are valued primarily for their appearance and sexual appeal. This

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theory is highly relevant to the comparative analysis of the representation of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films. Both industries have historically portrayed women through the lens of objectification, where female characters are often limited to roles that emphasize beauty, sexuality, or servitude, rather than complex, multidimensional identities (Gill, 2007; Nwafor, Nwasum, & Nkwuda, 2017) and Odoemelam, & Nwafor, 2012).

In Hollywood, while there has been progress in recent years toward more diverse and empowering representations of women, many films continue to depict female characters in objectified roles, often reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2017). The industry's global influence further perpetuates these depictions across different media landscapes. Nollywood, on the other hand, also tends to portray women in roles that emphasize subservience or focus on physical appearance, though there are notable exceptions that reflect the evolving socio-cultural context of Nigeria (Akinbola, 2018). The lower production budgets and rapid filmmaking processes in Nollywood may lead to the recycling of familiar, gendered tropes that align with societal expectations.

This comparative analysis provides insight into how cultural and economic factors influence the ways in which women are portrayed in films, and how Objectification Theory can help deconstruct these portrayals.

Issues and Concerns in Sex and Gender Studies

Gender and sex are critical issues of global concern, particularly in how they shape inequalities in various sectors such as the workplace, healthcare, financial institutions, and media representation. Across the world, women encounter systemic disadvantages in these areas, largely due to entrenched gender norms and expectations. Scholars, media professionals, and communication researchers often use the terms "sex" and "gender" to delineate the biological differences between males and females, as well as the social roles and behaviors typically associated with men and women (Watts & Zimmerman, 2014). While "sex" refers to the biological and physiological differences between males and females (World Health Organization, 2017), "gender" encompasses the socially constructed roles and behaviors that society deems appropriate for men and women.

For instance, a newborn is usually classified as a girl or boy based on physical characteristics, specifically genitalia, which reflect biological differences between the sexes. Most individuals are assigned a particular sex at birth, which influences the gender roles they are expected to perform throughout their lives (Olawale, 2016). In many cultures, biological females are socialized to adopt behaviors considered feminine, while biological males are encouraged to embody masculine traits. This process of gender socialization is succinctly captured by feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir's assertion, "One is not born a man but becomes one" and "One is not born a woman but becomes one" (De Beauvoir, 2005, p. 12). De Beauvoir highlights the way individuals are shaped by societal expectations to fit into predefined gender roles, rather than these roles being inherent to their biology.

Thus, gender roles are not simply reflections of biological differences but are, instead, the product of social and cultural expectations. These roles, often reinforced through media

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representations, continue to shape how individuals are perceived and treated in various aspects of life.

Historical Background of the Film Industries

The Hollywood

Film production is over a century old, and films have become a treasured art form worldwide, enduring significant economic, political, and social changes, including two world wars and economic depressions (Bocchino, 2014 and Onwe, Nwafor, & Orji-Egwu, 2017). The origins of Hollywood date back to 1910, when a group of young filmmakers left New York for Los Angeles to escape the harsh winter conditions. At that time, films were typically short, 10-minute productions, and the film industry was dominated by French companies based in Paris. In fact, American audiences consumed more French films than domestic productions (Metz, 2006). It wasn't until 1917 that Hollywood began to take its modern studio form, controlled by a small number of independent firms.

The early Hollywood film industry was shaped by a group of companies known as the "Big Five," which consisted of Paramount, 20th Century Fox, RKO, MGM, and Warner Bros. These companies were major investors in film production and were responsible for iconic early films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Dir: Fleming, 1939) and *Citizen Kane* (Dir: Welles, 1941) (Metz, 2006). Other notable companies included Columbia, Universal, and United Artists. However, from 1994 to 2017, Hollywood underwent a major shift due to conglomerate changes. As a result, the Big Five became Walt Disney Studios, Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Columbia Pictures, and Warner Bros. Entertainment (Kasim-Mohammed, 2020).

The Golden Age of Hollywood, from the 1930s to the 1940s, saw a decline in the number of film viewers due to World War II, which reduced profits for film studios. During this era, Hollywood transitioned from silent films to "talkies"—audible motion pictures—and films were still largely produced in black and white. Advancements in technology after the war led to increased accessibility to films and a resurgence in viewership. In the 1930s, film plots typically centered around entertainment and escapism to provide relief during the Great Depression, while in the 1940s, wartime films often focused on patriotism. As audiences grew tired of traditional genres, Hollywood responded by introducing musicals and epic films in the 1950s (Bocchino, 2014).

The 1960s and 1970s marked a significant shift in the film industry, with the rise of television leading to a decline in film viewership and the "death" of classical Hollywood. Financial challenges faced by the major studios allowed for the rise of independent filmmakers, who explored themes such as love, civil rights, rock and roll, and drugs (Bocchino, 2014). This period is often referred to as the "Hollywood Renaissance," when innovative blockbuster films emerged, although they maintained thematic similarities to those of the 1940s and 1950s (Metz, 2006). The 1980s brought advancements in technology, most notably the introduction of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), which made film production cheaper and faster, while also increasing viewership.

The 1990s and 2000s were characterized by rising production costs and higher salaries for actors, but continued technological developments allowed filmmakers to produce epic films on a scale

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that was previously unimaginable. During this time, Hollywood focused on maximizing profits, producing films that catered to audiences' demands for fantasy, escapism, and entertainment. Over the past century, Hollywood has proven itself to be adaptable, as noted by Metz (2006), who observes that the industry has been "receptive to change" (p. 26). Today, Hollywood is a billion-dollar industry with a global reach, particularly with action blockbusters earning millions worldwide.

The Nollywood

Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, is the largest in Africa and one of the most prolific in the world, producing thousands of films each year. Despite the early introduction of celluloid films to Nigeria in the early 20th century, the domestic film industry struggled to thrive due to high production costs and a lack of professional expertise (Chowdhury, Landesz, Santini, Tejada, & Visconti, 2008). The first public film screenings in Nigeria occurred in 1903 at Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos, where mainly documentary films were showcased (Bawa, 2017; Onuzulike, 2008).

Nigerian cinema began to experience significant growth following the country's independence in 1960. This period saw the construction of new cinemas and a rise in the production of indigenous Nigerian content, particularly from the western region (Bawa, 2017). However, much of the film production during this era was focused on documentaries and newsreels rather than commercial filmmaking (Onuzulike, 2008).

A pivotal turning point for Nollywood came in 1972 with the implementation of the Indigenization Decree by General Yakubu Gowon. This policy transferred ownership of hundreds of film theaters from foreign owners to Nigerians, providing local filmmakers with an opportunity to expand the industry. However, despite this policy, Nigerian filmmakers initially faced challenges in producing commercially successful films (Onuzulike, 2008).

Nollywood gained international recognition in the early 1990s, driven by the digital revolution. Filmmakers began using camcorders as a more affordable alternative to 35-millimeter film cameras, while digital systems replaced celluloid for recording, resulting in faster and cheaper film production and distribution processes (Erick, 2014). The hallmark of Nollywood's rise was the 1992 production of the Igbo-language film *Living in Bondage* (Dir: Nnebue, 1992), which marked the beginning of a new era of film commercialization in Nigeria and the birth of Nollywood as it is known today (Oyewole, 2014).

Overview of Films Selected for Comparative Analysis

Synopsis of Widows

Widows (2018) is a crime drama film set in Chicago, based on the novel Widows by Lynda La Plante. The story follows Veronica (Viola Davis), Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), and Linda (Michelle Rodriguez) who plan a heist after their husbands' deaths. The film features Liam Neeson, Colin Farrell, Robert Duvall, and Daniel Kaluuya, among others. The heist is orchestrated by four men: Harry Rawlings (Liam Neeson), Carlos Perelli (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo), Florek Gunner (Jon Bernthal), and Jimmy Nunn (Coburn Goss). The group's van is destroyed in

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an explosion, killing all four men. Veronica wakes up alone, setting the stage for her subsequent decisions.

A parallel plot revolves around Jack Mulligan (Colin Farrell), a corrupt alderman running for alderman of the 18th ward in Chicago, following in the footsteps of his corrupt father, Tom Mulligan (Robert Duvall). Jack's rival is Jamal Manning (Brian Tyree Henry), a crime boss aiming for political power. The racial and political tensions between the two candidates are highlighted in various confrontations. After the failed heist, Veronica attends Harry's funeral and receives a $2 million heist from Jamal to fund his political campaign. Linda discovers her shop is being repossessed due to her husband Carlos's debts, and Alice contemplates becoming an escort to make ends meet. Veronica finds Harry still alive and secretly seeing Amanda (Carrie Coon), a woman he has been secretly seeing.

On the night of the heist, the women successfully infiltrate the Mulligans' home, retrieve the money, and escape. However, conflict arises when Tom Mulligan confronts the group, shoots Alice, and reveals Veronica's identity. Linda kills Tom to save herself and her partners, while Jatemme attempts to steal the money. In the aftermath, Veronica kills Harry, staging the scene to appear as a suicide. Jack Mulligan wins the election, leveraging the sympathy surrounding his father's death. The film concludes with the women finding closure and new beginnings, with Alice planning to open her own business and Linda buying back her shop.

Synopsis of Sugar Rush

Sugar Rush (2019) is a Nollywood comedy-action-crime film directed by Kayode Kasum and starring Adesua Etomi, Bimbo Ademoye, and Bisola Aiyeola. The film follows three sisters, Susie, Sola, and Bola, who discover a bag containing $800,000 in Chief Douglas' house. The discovery leads to a chain of events involving the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), criminal gangs, and life-threatening confrontations.

The Sugar sisters, who spend a large portion of the money and throw a lavish housewarming party, are under scrutiny when Chief Douglas is murdered. The EFCC visits their home and investigates, but they are taken in for questioning. Andy, the EFCC's boyfriend, steals the money before they can act, leading to their arrest. Gina, the ruthless leader of a mafia gang, kidnaps the sisters and forces them into a dangerous plan to steal the money from her husband, Anikulapo. The Sugar sisters collaborate with EFCC officials to recover the stolen money, and Gina, unaware of the trap set by the EFCC, inadvertently confesses to the murder of Chief Douglas. A shootout leads to Gina's death, but the EFCC officials manage to recover the stolen cash. The Sugar sisters are cleared of all charges and flee the country.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The analysis of Nollywood films in various studies reveals consistent themes of patriarchal representation and the objectification of women. Abah (2008), in his qualitative analysis of three Nollywood films from 2004 to 2006, asserts that the portrayal of women in these films is deeply patriarchal, a reflection of the androcentric nature of African societies. According to Abah, these representations depict women as passive, lacking initiative, and unable to control or transform

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their own lives (p. 354). This aligns with the broader narrative in African cinema, where women are often relegated to roles that reinforce societal norms of submission and docility.

Similarly, Brock's (2009) analysis of five Nollywood films—*The Mistress* (Dir: Oduwa, 2006), *Keep My Will* (Dir: Onyeka, 2007), *Holy City* (Dir: Olisaemeka, 2009), *More Than Sisters* (2009), and *My Christian Faith* (2009)—argues that these films not only objectify women sexually but also contribute to the perception of women as inferior in society. Brock's findings are significant in highlighting how the portrayal of women in films influences societal attitudes towards women, reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Azeez (2010) further investigates how women themselves perceive these portrayals through a three-session focus group discussion involving viewers aged 18-45. His study reveals some variation in perception based on educational and social exposure, but overall, participants agreed that Nollywood films consistently depict women negatively. This consensus, Azeez argues, necessitates a shift in the cultural discourse that devalues women (p. 2017).

Ukata (2010) echoes these sentiments in her study of five Nollywood films, including *I Was Wrong*, *The Tyrant*, and *Masterstroke*. She argues that Nigerian films are produced within a patriarchal framework that portrays women as evil, weak, materialistic, and greedy. These portrayals, according to Ukata, contribute to the societal perception of women as morally deficient and undeserving of respect within their families and communities. This argument aligns with the findings of Shaka and Uchendu (2012), who contend that since the rise of Nollywood in the early 1990s, the industry's most prominent themes have been rooted in patriarchal ideologies that stereotype and objectify women. Their analysis of *Jenifa* (Dir: Akindele, 2009) reveals a lead female character portrayed as a manipulative femme fatale whose actions ultimately lead to her downfall, a representation that could influence young women negatively.

The same trend is evident in *Games Women Play* (Dir: Imasuen, 2005), as Shaka and Uchendu (2012) reveal. The female protagonist is depicted as manipulative and morally corrupt, a stark contrast to male characters who are often portrayed as redeemable. These representations, the authors argue, are heavily influenced by patriarchal values (p. 14). Dossoumon (2013) also highlights this trend in his textual analysis of the top-five most viewed Nollywood films on iROKO TV, noting that the plots of these films reinforce traditional gender roles. Women are portrayed as submissive and weak, while non-conformist women are marginalized.

Alzahrani (2016) extends this analysis by comparing Nollywood and Hollywood films, asserting that the portrayal of women in both industries influences societal perceptions. In Nollywood films like *Mr. & Mrs.* and *Ije*, women are depicted as dependent on men, while Hollywood films, such as *Sex and the City*, follow a similar pattern of portraying women as reliant on male figures for success (p. 533).

Joseph (2018) offers a counterpoint by examining films directed by female filmmakers. His study of *Keeping My Man* (Dir: Sanda, 2013), *Flower Girl* (Dir: Bello, 2013), and *Dry* (Dir: Okereke-Linus, 2014) reveals a more positive representation of women. However, Joseph notes

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that despite these advancements, female directors are still a minority in the industry, and their efforts to challenge patriarchal norms are limited (p. 179).

Finally, Endong (2019) assesses the varying perspectives of Nigerian female actors on taking on sexually demeaning roles in cinema. He notes that some actresses see such roles as liberating, while others view them as demeaning, reflecting the complex relationship between gender, culture, and representation in Nollywood (p. 70).

METHOD

The study employed a combination of content analysis and interviews within a qualitative research framework. The selected methods were designed to complement one another, enabling the research questions and interviews to provide insights that adequately assess audience perceptions of women's portrayals in Nollywood films. The population of this study is the top 10 box office Hollywood films of 2018 and top 10 box office Nollywood films produced in 2019 listed on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) that have one female lead character and two supporting female lead characters. The population also includes the different scenes that portrays the camera angle of the female lead characters and the two female supporting characters. The unit of analysis of this study is 6 characters which include 1 female lead and 2 female supporting actors from each film studying them based on their physical appearance, language & dialogues and roles and 6 undergraduates law students. The technique used for sampling in this study was purposive sampling technique. The films analyzed in this study were purposively selected based on their storyline (having female lead characters). The research instrument was mainly validated via the peer review process. This was achieved through constant consultation with the research supervisor on the research findings, interpretation and the research methodology. Analysis of the actors of the various films require keen observation and recording of pivotal textual information gotten by consistently viewing the films. This involved paying close attention to language and dialogues including meanings communicated in the films, roles and taking note of the physical appearances of the actors. For the interview, an interview schedule was sent to prospective respondents to know the time they would be available for the interview. This study utilized textual analysis, pictorial analysis, and interviews, believed to be well-suited for its the objectives.

DISCUSSION

The study examined the representation of 6 female characters in Hollywood and Nollywood film industries utilizing textual and pictorial analysis. The base of analysis includes the characters' physical appearance, speech and dialogue and the roles they play. The data for the study consists of two films produced in 2018 and 2019 and selected from each of the film industries.

Research Question 1: Investigate the pattern of portrayal of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?

The findings of the study reveal that Hollywood represents women positively. In terms of their physical appearance, the female characters do not wear sexually revealing outfits, their nudity is

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not shown and none of them is portrayed as object of scopophilia. Also, only the female lead gets comments on her visual appearance. On their speech and dialogue, the women in Hollywood are confident and audacious in their conversations but the female lead suffers from verbal slurs from the male characters. For Nollywood, the findings reveal that women are negatively portrayed because they wear sexually revealing outfits and are seen as objects of scopophilia. They suffer verbal slurs from the male characters are portrayed as femme fatales, unintelligent, deceitful and lazy which indicates that there is very little or no change in the way women are represented in Nollywood. This confirms the study of Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya & Osunkunle (2019) that women in Nollywood are sexually objectified and exploited.

Research Question 2: What are the similarities in portrayal pattern of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?

On the physical appearance of women in the two film industries, the findings reveal that the women do not have the same representation. The visual appearance of the women differs from each industry; hence the findings reveal that there are no similarities on this. This may be because of cultural differences as agreed by Onuzulike (2008) that Nollywood films are greatly influenced by Nigerian cultures and supports the assertion of Mahmood (2013) that cinema mirrors the culture and society within which it operates. Both the film industries however do not portray extreme nudity of any of the female characters.
On their language and dialogue however, all the female leads and supporting actors in the two film industries appear to be confident, assertive and daring in their speech with the exception of the two supporting actors from the Nollywood film, Sola and Bola.

Research Question 3: What are the differences in portrayal pattern of women in Hollywood and Nollywood films?

On the physical appearance of the women in the three film industries, the findings reveal that the female characters in Hollywood and film industries do not wear sexually revealing outfits, they do not get comments on their attractiveness/beauty, their nudity is not seen and are not portrayed as objects of scopophilia but in Nollywood, the female characters including the lead actor wear sexually revealing outfits that accentuate their body, they get comments on their beauty, their nudity is exposed and they are portrayed as objects of voyeurism. This supports the findings of Irigoyen (2017) that there is a significant change in the stereotypical portrayal of women in Hollywood marks the beginning of an era of films that have females as the major characters. This also backs the assertion of Aromona (2016) that there is not any noteworthy change in the conventional representations of women in Nollywood cinema.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is a significant change in the representation of women in Hollywood; the films analyzed give an insight into the portrayal of women when they are at the center point of the films. The female characters analyzed appear to exude a lot of confidence and are very intelligent contrary to some representation in the years before. Although there are still some hints of patriarchy for example, in the way the male characters speak to them, the

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representation of women generally in these two film industries are highly complacent to feminist ideologies. The study reveals a dissimilarity in Nollywood film industry where the representation of women is still negative with hints of patriarchy. The female characters analyzed were portrayed as objects of scopophilia, femme fatales and overly dependent on men; these themes that have been associated with Nollywood since its proliferation in the past decades.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

- The establishment of a global film regulatory and monitoring body is recommended so as to look into the obvious and salient negative representations of both genders and other groups of people stereotyped or stigmatized in global film industries.

- More women globally should be encouraged to take up the role of film producers and directors to mitigate the male gaze effect in films and so women could take the role of painting their images the way they deem fit. The movie A Tribe Called Judah directed by Funke Akindele is already setting the pace.

  Nollywood film producers should be consciously aware of the harm their negative representation of women does and should make deliberate efforts towards painting good images of women through their accomplishments.

Ethical Clearance: ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. they were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and there participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest: the authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author's Contribution: Prof Fred Amadi and Judith Martins conceived the study, including the design, Dr Sarah C. Joe and Judith Martins collated the data and handled the analysis and interpretation, while Prof Fred Amadi and Dr Sarah C. Joe the initial manuscript. all authors have critically reviewed and approved for the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials. the datasets on which coclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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