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Discourse Analysis of Media Warfare and the Hegemony of Signifiers in the 2022 Iran Protests: Investigating Opposition Media Techniques Through the Lens of Laclau and Mouffe

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ABSTRACT

This study applies Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to examine media warfare and the hegemony of signifiers during the 2022 protests in Iran. The primary objective is to clarify how opposition media constructed and stabilized subversive discourse by organizing social and political elements around central signifiers such as "regime change," "victim/oppressor," "inefficiency/corruption," and "legitimate violence." The dataset consisted of 100 influential opposition media programs and social network channels produced throughout the protests. Using a qualitative methodology, the study systematically identified nodal (central) and floating signifiers and analyzed how chains of equivalence were formed across disparate grievances and identity markers. The findings indicate that opposition media, through narrative strategies, emotional polarization, and crisis framing, effectively forged new protest identities and facilitated collective mobilization. The consolidation of discursive hegemony was reinforced by the performative use of symbols and affect, intensifying both the scale and persistence of the unrest and contributing to broader social instability. By comparing these results with prior research and contemporary theoretical frameworks, the paper concludes that effective responses to media warfare require a reassessment of state communication strategies and the enhancement of media literacy across all sectors of society.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, media warfare, 2022 Iran protests, nodal signifier, floating signifier, discursive hegemony, narrative, social networks.*

Introduction

The rise of new communication technologies, with their inherent potential to redefine social relations and structures, has fundamentally transformed contemporary society. The vast expansion of cyberspace, particularly through social networks, has enlarged the domain of informational dominance and governance, giving rise to a novel concept known as "virtual reality" or "real virtuality." This new landscape serves as both a context and a catalyst for major political, social, and cultural transformations. It provides fertile ground for the construction of new

identities, the formation of consensus-building spheres and horizontal interactions, and the emergence of resistance centers, social movements, public mobilization, protests, riots, and acts of civil disobedience.

In Iran, the widespread presence of internet users and the high penetration of social media have cultivated a networked society that profoundly influences all dimensions of Iranian life, particularly the political sphere. Key political concepts such as participation, power, identity, legitimacy, and resistance are now deeply mediated by this environment (1).

From a discourse analysis perspective (2, 3), these networks operate as arenas of semantic conflict in which protest sub-discourses are produced and reproduced, challenging traditional and hegemonic power structures. This dynamic enables the migration of new political actions into cyberspace, where competing discourses strategically employ media tools—such as narrative techniques and framing—to shape audience perceptions and orientations.

In recent years, following the perceived failure of hard-power policies by the United States and the West, a shift toward new strategies grounded in soft-power tools and media warfare has become evident regarding Iran. As documented by Abolghasemi et al., Western media policy has maintained an explicitly confrontational stance toward the Islamic Republic since its inception (4). With the growing influence of public opinion, media has acquired a determining role in advancing domestic and foreign policy goals—a trend clearly reflected during episodes of domestic unrest over at least the past decade.

The tragic death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 acted as a powerful catalyst, triggering widespread protests that shaped the national atmosphere for weeks. Although a relative calm gradually returned after several months, adversarial media outlets—especially those active on social networks—persistently sought to reignite unrest by intensifying media warfare around the anniversary of the event. Such persistent turmoil disrupts political governance, weakens public trust, and undermines investment, potentially paving the way for deeper crises (5).

Hostile media channels, by centering their efforts on media warfare, target the most critical arena of influence: public opinion. In today's world, no collective action or movement can effectively form or endure without extensive support from mass media. Through continuous and widespread coverage, media stimuli mobilize various segments of the public and encourage apathetic or "gray" groups to participate in collective action. Moreover, media narratives reinforce assertiveness—and even violence—among protestors while enhancing group cohesion, thereby accelerating and intensifying unrest (6). This pattern was clearly observed during the 2022 protests.

Employing discourse analysis, this study aims to elucidate the dominant discourse shaping the content and programs disseminated by adversarial networks during the 2022 protests, thereby revealing the complex dimensions of this phenomenon.

Contemporary conflicts—often framed as postmodern wars—typically unfold across three principal stages: media operations, psychological warfare, and, ultimately, military engagement. The instruments used in such confrontations merge global media capabilities with advanced military technologies to achieve pervasive dissemination (7). Analysts and strategists argue that the inability of hegemonic powers to fully execute hard-war policies, combined with the limitations of soft-power approaches such as propaganda and psychological operations, has spurred the adoption of a new methodology termed "hybrid warfare" (8).

Hybrid warfare involves the coordinated and simultaneous deployment of regular and irregular forces under unified command in conflict zones. Advanced iterations of this model orient themselves toward cognitive objectives, seeking to transform the target actor's attitudes, interpretive frameworks, and analytical structures (6). Within this

context, media warfare functions as a central tool, amplifying anger within society and increasing the risk that it will manifest as real-world social violence.

The emergence of new communication technologies has facilitated the development of “virtual social violence,” a phenomenon previously less observable. In digital environments, users often express violence in forms that may not be visible in the physical world, though their effects are strongly felt in real public spaces (9). Cyberspace and social media, armed with advanced technological capacities, play a pivotal role in reproducing and disseminating violence. The escalating anger among networked users not only becomes a dominant cultural force but also generates widespread momentum for collective reactions and actions (10).

Rising anger and instability within virtual communities can eventually translate into street-level protests. Under these volatile conditions, intelligence and espionage agencies increasingly exploit modern cyber technologies to identify, organize, and provoke individuals into coordinated and planned actions (1). This dynamic has intensified states’ vulnerability to complex, unpredictable, and multi-dimensional threats (11, 12).

Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine analytically and comprehensively the dominant discourse of the media warfare employed during the recent unrest. Such an investigation is essential for illuminating the complex nature of this phenomenon and, in future research, for identifying and proposing effective countermeasures.

Theoretical Framework

Information Warfare Theory (IWT)

Information Warfare Theory (IWT) has become a key framework for understanding how the manipulation, control, and dissemination of information contribute to achieving strategic objectives in the modern world. With rapid technological advancement and the interconnectedness enabled by the internet, the nature of conflict has transcended traditional military arenas and expanded into social, political, and economic domains. This shift reflects the multifaceted character of contemporary conflict, in which information functions as a crucial asset capable of influencing public opinion, elections, and national narratives.

Historically, the roots of information warfare can be traced to strategic military practices across different periods. From the deceptive tactics of ancient societies to modern psychological operations, the management of information has long been a critical aspect of warfare. In the digital era, this importance has intensified, enabling a broad array of information warfare activities—including propaganda dissemination, cyber operations, and mass-media manipulation. Social media platforms, within this environment, have emerged as potent tools for global information warfare by facilitating rapid disinformation flows (8).

The core focus of IWT is the strategic manipulation of information. Information is not merely a passive tool but an active strategic resource deployed to achieve specific objectives. Both state and non-state actors use information to shape public perceptions and influence discourses surrounding political movements, social issues, and even military operations (12). This dynamic is intensified by the asymmetry inherent in information warfare: unconventional actors, equipped with tools to exploit informational vulnerabilities, can disrupt established powers without resorting to traditional military engagement. This asymmetry forces traditional powers to rethink security paradigms, as the manipulation of information can fuel violence, civil unrest, and the weakening of democratic structures (5).

Media Interaction Warfare Theory (MIWT)

Within the contemporary landscape of conflict, the role of media has shifted from simple reportage to active participation. The Media Interaction Warfare Theory (MIWT) argues that the complexity of warfare is magnified by the proliferation of media platforms, each facilitating unique forms of interaction that profoundly shape conflict dynamics. This evolution necessitates a reconsideration of traditional military strategies, as adaptive approaches must now address a mediated battlespace characterized by instantaneous information flows, audience engagement, and multifaceted media interactions (1).

Understanding MIWT requires tracing the evolution of warfare in relation to media. Historically, warfare centered on direct military confrontation, with minimal attention paid to the surrounding narratives. However, the rise of mass media—and later digital and social media—has elevated the informational dimension of warfare. Today's landscape encompasses television, social media, blogs, and podcasts, generating massive information flows and diverse interpretive frameworks used by competing actors.

A key component of MIWT is information dissemination. When information circulates across social media, it creates a real-time battleground where narratives can be rapidly constructed, contested, and amplified (12). This immediacy enables swift shifts in public opinion, often independent of factual accuracy, placing new pressures on traditional strategic planning. Furthermore, media serves as a tool for psychological operations, influencing public sentiment, shaping morale, and discrediting adversaries (13). Disinformation campaigns further illustrate how media can obscure truth and generate confusion, complicating wartime dynamics.

The interactive nature of modern media introduces a participatory dimension, transforming civilians into active agents in shaping conflict narratives. Citizen journalism, hashtag activism, and viral content can amplify public voices and produce decentralized forms of wartime communication. This shift demands a reassessment of military strategies, as traditional approaches treat military, diplomatic, and informational efforts as separate spheres. MIWT proposes a more integrated framework, emphasizing the importance of understanding the media environment and anticipating audience reactions. As media increasingly becomes a participant in conflict, the boundaries of warfare blur, generating significant ethical and legal implications (13).

Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyze the dominant techniques and discourses employed in adversarial media warfare during the 2022 protests in Iran. To achieve this aim, the study adopts the Hegemonic Discourse Analysis approach developed by Laclau and Mouffe. This framework emphasizes semantic analysis and examines central and floating signifiers within discourses. It enables the exploration of meaning structures embedded in adversarial media narratives and clarifies how these meanings emerge and become stabilized within media and cognitive warfare contexts.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a system of meanings that binds specific concepts together, forming semantic hegemony within a socio-political context. Key concepts in this framework include "floating signifiers," which carry multiple meanings and become tools of political struggle, and "nodal points," which stabilize the articulation of floating signifiers by providing coherent focal meanings (14).

To conduct the analysis, content and discourse examination was performed on 100 news and analytical programs from adversarial networks, as well as highly active Instagram pages, during the period of the 2022

protests. Sampling was based on the outlets' significance in media warfare, their level of influence, and public accessibility. The analysis included verbal content, imagery, prominent critiques, and expert commentary to identify the dominant discourse and semantic tensions between messages across adversarial media sources.

During the analysis, collected texts and narratives were coded according to Laclau and Mouffe's framework. Floating signifiers—assigned multiple meanings in reaction to protest events—were identified and articulated with nodal points that served as centers of discursive stability. These nodal points, such as "destabilization," "public anger," and "undermining regime legitimacy," functioned as key anchors organizing other concepts and discursive components.

This qualitative discourse analysis approach revealed deep semantic structures and relationships among discursive elements. Special attention was paid to event representation, framing strategies, and repetitive patterns that contributed to discursive hegemony. As Fairclough emphasizes, discourse analysis serves as a strategic tool for uncovering how power and resistance are constructed through language and meaning (2).

Finally, the findings of this research are presented through the lens of the Laclau and Mouffe framework to illuminate macro-level trends and strategic dimensions of media warfare, as well as the role of adversarial media in shaping political discourses related to the 2022 protests.

Findings

The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is one of the most prominent post-structuralist approaches in the social and political sciences, articulated in their work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This theory understands discourse not merely as a collection of words or signs, but as a system of differential relations that stabilizes meanings and shapes identities. Central to this theory is the concept of hegemony, originally borrowed from Gramsci but radicalized by Laclau and Mouffe: hegemony is the process by which a particular discourse, through articulating dispersed elements, achieves a temporary fixation of meaning, presenting itself as "natural" or "inevitable" (14).

The two key concepts in this framework are *Nodal Points* and *Floating Signifiers*. Nodal Points function as anchoring signifiers around which the meanings of other signs are organized; they operate as the "core" of the discourse, enabling partial fixation of meaning. Floating Signifiers, by contrast, are signs whose meanings remain open, indeterminate, and subject to contestation by rival discourses. These signifiers constitute the field of hegemonic struggle: the discourse that succeeds in filling their meaning gains hegemony.

In the discourse analysis of the Iranian unrest (summarized in Table No. 1 as "Identified Themes and Categories"), the issues presented are treated as a discursive text that inventories the media-psychological strategies of opposition networks. These themes represent elements articulated within an anti-systemic (overthrow-oriented) hegemonic discourse. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the Nodal Points and Floating Signifiers in this discourse to demonstrate how it seeks to impose its hegemony over Iran's socio-political space.

The table contains more than 100 categories grouped into thematic clusters. These categories operate as signifiers within a unified discourse whose objective is the overthrow of the Islamic Republic through psychological, media, and violent operations. The discourse draws on dispersed elements (economic grievances, gender issues, ethnic identities, youth concerns) to construct an *equivalence chain* that unifies all dissatisfaction against a common enemy—the ruling establishment.

Based on detailed analysis of the table, the Nodal Points and Floating Signifiers were identified as follows. Nodal Points are the centers around which most categories are structured and through which meanings are fixed. Floating Signifiers are the concepts highlighted in the table whose meanings remain open and are mobilized to attract diverse constituencies.

Theoretical Contextualization and Application to the Iranian Unrest

Laclau and Mouffe define discourse as "the attempt to master the field of differentiality." In the table, this field includes scattered elements such as economic grievances (unemployment, inflation), social issues (hijab, women), ethnic identity (Kurds, Baluchis), and religious institutions (revolutionary entities). The overthrowing discourse constructs an equivalence chain—*all problems = the establishment's fault*—in direct opposition to the differential chain of the official discourse, which attributes problems to sanctions or external forces.

The Nodal Point "Overthrow" plays the central hegemonizing role. Categories such as "Encouraging youth to violent acts for the purpose of overthrow" or "Emphasizing the overthrowing nature of the protests" indicate how this signifier subsumes all actions—from hashtags to bombings—into a single political logic. Laclau states that a Nodal Point creates "partial meaning"; here, "Overthrow" redefines the Floating Signifier "Freedom," fixing it to mean "regime change." Floating Signifiers such as "Freedom" thus become the terrain of struggle: whereas the official discourse links freedom to "independence," the opposition discourse—through slogans such as "Woman, Life, Freedom"—rearticulates it as anti-hijab and anti-establishment (14).

Analysis of the Theme "Communication and Empathy with Vulnerable Groups"

This theme—containing categories such as empathy with divorced women, children of divorce, addicts, and individuals with criminal records—functions as a strategy for constructing protest subjects. Laclau and Mouffe argue that discourse creates subjects through identification. Here, the anti-systemic discourse constructs subjects such as the "Victim of the System." These subjects are woven into the equivalence chain: child of divorce = divorced woman = addict = criminal = all positioned against the system. This hegemonic formation is achieved through affect. Mouffe's later works emphasize the centrality of affect in political identification. Emotional empathy thus becomes a foundation for mobilization, while practices such as identifying users who "like" anti-system content constitute forms of discursive surveillance.

Encouragement of Practical Actions and Training for Destructive Materials

Categories such as encouraging graffiti ("Death to the Dictator"), burning trash bins, bombings, bomb-making tutorials, and attacks on sensitive centers illustrate a shift from discourse to action—from signification to materialization. Laclau argues that a discourse becomes hegemonic when it evolves into an *alternative hegemonic project*, organizing political action (14). The Nodal Point "Legitimate Violence" is central here. By framing violence as just or lawful (e.g., "justifying violent acts as fair"), the discourse blurs the lines between protest and terrorism. This mirrors Laclau's discussion of guerrilla movements in Latin America, where violence is framed as a "historical necessity." Training to produce explosives for attacks on embassies attempts to fill the Floating Signifier "Iran in the World" with the meaning "isolated by the regime."

Infiltration in Cyberspace and Highlighting Concepts

Strategies include infiltrating professional groups, defaming artists cooperating with the state, and producing emotionally charged videos. These are techniques of narrative warfare. Laclau conceptualizes discourse as a "war of positions." Here, opposition Persian-language media serve as the apparatuses of articulation. Highlighting corruption, moral scandals, and portraying a global consensus against the government exploit cognitive biases addressed in contemporary media research (15). The Bandwagon Effect or False Consensus Effect fixes the Floating Signifier "The People" as "everyone against the regime." Whitewashing the Pahlavi era and depicting the current system as anti-Iranian is an attempt to rewrite history, consistent with Laclau's discussion of "empty signifiers."

Bipolarization, Distrust, and Creation of False Expectations

Constructing dichotomies such as good/evil and oppressor/victim, reinterpreting events, and maligning government actions form the populist core of the discourse. Laclau argues that populism constructs "The People" against "The Elite." Here, "The People" are the victimized protestors, while "The Elite" becomes the ruling establishment. Attributing unrelated incidents (e.g., suicides, accidental falls) to state repression is a false-flag strategy aimed at delegitimization. Rumor-spreading and eroding trust in official media foster a crisis of hegemony consistent with Laclau's concept of the "organic moment."

Highlighting Problems, Generating Violence, and Narrative Warfare

Highlighting sanctions, police violence, environmental crises, and hopelessness activates collapse-oriented cognitive biases. The Nodal Point "Inefficiency" organizes these grievances into a coherent structure. Encouraging assassination ("terrorism is like oxygen") and organizing marches as symbolic armies attempt to transform protests into a "war of positions" in the Gramscian sense. Attributing inherent malice to the establishment and portraying protestors as victims, reinforced by emotional narratives, aligns with the theory of political affect.

Networking, Use of Celebrities, and Cognitive Techniques

The use of bots, networking protest groups, and targeting youth and celebrities constitute key strategies. Youth are targeted for their emotional responsiveness, while celebrities function as symbolic authorities. Consequently, dual definitions of terrorism, exaggerating protest numbers, and featuring Western diplomats fill the Floating Signifier "Human Rights" with Western-oriented meanings (13).

Undermining Unity, Discrediting, and Use of Symbols

Emphasizing ethnic tensions and normalization of opposition to official values attempts to break the official discourse's equivalence chain (national unity). Cognitive techniques such as the false-consensus effect, filter bubbles, and computational propaganda strengthen the discourse's digital hegemony. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," the mythologization of the deceased, and protest music operate as mythical signifiers, consistent with Laclau's analysis of populist symbolism.

Dehumanization and Delegitimization

Demonizing security forces and portraying religious beliefs as superstition constitute attempts at enemy politics, which Mouffe distinguishes from agonism. In summary, this overthrowing discourse—anchored by Nodal Points such as Overthrow and Victim/Oppressor—attempts to produce an anti-systemic hegemony. However, as Laclau contends, no hegemony is ever complete; there are always elements outside the chain (e.g., segments of the population supporting the establishment). Countering this discourse requires a rival articulation that refills Floating Signifiers such as Freedom and Justice with alternative, revolutionary meanings.

Table 1: Nodal Points, Floating Signifiers, and Their Relations (Based on Laclau & Mouffe's Theory)

Nodal Point	Floating/Peripheral Signifiers	Relationship
Overthrow/Unrest	Protest/Demonstration, Legitimate Violence, Terror of Security Defenders, Bombing, Arson of Public Places	Operational Chain of Equivalence: All practical actions (from hashtags to armed attacks) are unified around Overthrow as the ultimate objective, translating dispersed acts into a singular political project.
Victim/Oppressor	Victimized Women/Youth, Heroic Protestors, Demonized Security Defenders, Mythologized Deceased	Emotional Bipolarization: Victims are equated with the "Real People," and the Oppressor with the "Regime" (fixing the Floating Signifier "The People" with an anti-systemic meaning).
Regime Inefficiency/Corruption	Economic Corruption, Moral Scandals, Environmental Issues, Sanctions, Unemployment, Inflation	Attribution of Common Enemy: All daily problems are attributed to systemic inefficiency (inducing a shared perception of the regime as the root cause of all failures).
Legitimate Violence	Incitement to Violent Acts, Bomb-Making Training, Attack on Sensitive Centers, False Flag	Provisional Fixation of Meaning: Violence is reframed as "defensive" or "just," temporarily fixing the meaning of "Justice" as retribution.
Youth/Women as Victims	Freedom (Anti-Hijab), Feminist Movement, Celebrities, Emotional Teenagers, Unveiled Clips	Affective-Emotional Targeting: Youth and women are positioned as the core of mobilization, filling the Floating Signifier "Freedom" with anti-establishment meanings.

Conclusion

This study examined the media warfare surrounding the 2022 protests in Iran using Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist discourse analysis framework. The findings indicate that adversarial media, by leveraging social networks and digital platforms, successfully established and reproduced an overthrow-oriented hegemonic discourse through the construction of a chain of equivalence among dispersed socio-political elements. This trend underscores the growing power of digital media in engineering public opinion and challenging the legitimacy of the governing structure (14).

An examination of the nodal points—such as "Overthrow/Unrest," "Victim/Oppressor," "Inefficiency/Corruption," "Legitimate Violence," and "Youth/Women as Victims"—demonstrated that each of these elements was articulated with peripheral signifiers (e.g., protest, legitimate violence, terror of security defenders, bombing, arson of public places) to form a unified chain of equivalence. The intended meaning of the adversarial discourse, achieved through the strategic organization of these elements around the nodal points, effectively shaped collective action and facilitated public mobilization (2).

The analysis highlighted the centrality of emotional bipolarization. Identity elements such as women and youth were transformed into symbolic victims, while the establishment was positioned as the oppressor. Through affect-laden representations and the amplification of collective emotions, the adversarial media constructed new protest identities and played a crucial role in digital mobilization. These findings are consistent with recent research emphasizing the role of affect and emotions in protest movements and contentious politics (10).

At another level, “Inefficiency/Corruption” functioned as a nodal point that anchored the hegemony of the critical discourse by directly linking everyday livelihood problems to the ruling system. This semantic project resembles earlier critical discourse work on how media reinforce negative representations and stereotypes of political authorities and institutional power holders (3). As Van Dijk notes, media power is particularly effective in foregrounding governmental weaknesses and shaping public attitudes toward political legitimacy and performance (3).

The analysis of the “Legitimate Violence” structure showed that adversarial media redefined the meaning of violence, shifting it from a terrorist act to a defensive and just act. The momentary fixation of “Justice” as vengeance and resistance against despotism was deployed as a core strategy in violent narrative construction. This mode of legitimizing violence has been critically problematized in discourse-analytic work for its role in normalizing aggression and obscuring power relations (2).

In the networking dimension, the pivotal role of young users and women was examined through the deployment of emotional and cultural signifiers (the symbol of freedom, unveiled clips, women’s protest imagery). The aim of these techniques was broad emotional mobilization and identity-based activation, consistent with recent studies on social media’s contribution to shaping protest identities and networked forms of contention (16, 17).

The comparative dimension of this study corresponds with research indicating that media and information warfare, as strategic tools in the hands of opposition actors, primarily exploit structural weaknesses in governance and society to mobilize public opinion, generate crises of hegemony, and create opportunities for escalation (11). In addition, other studies suggest that cyber techniques and networked operations have expanded and intensified the arena of information warfare available to adversarial groups (12).

On the theoretical level, juxtaposing this study with models of information warfare and media conflict analysis shows that, in the media battlespace, semantic congruence and the coherence of the chain of equivalence temporarily stabilize protest identity (12). However, as Laclau and Mouffe emphasize, no hegemony is permanent; antagonistic elements and sites of resistance always remain and can challenge this discursive dominance (14). Related work further confirms that the expansion of social media and the use of algorithmic and AI-driven techniques in the dissemination of misinformation and information warfare have exacerbated the psychological and social effects of protest dynamics, in line with this study’s findings (8).

Ultimately, this research demonstrated that adversarial media techniques during the 2022 protests, drawing on the theoretical foundations of discourse analysis, succeeded in producing semantic hegemony, mobilizing emotions, and reconfiguring nodal and peripheral signifiers. However, the stability and durability of this hegemony depend on the counter-capacity and representational power of the rival discourse, particularly that of official media and state-affiliated actors. Re-articulating the intended meanings of the official discourse within the floating signifiers of “Freedom,” “Justice,” “Human Rights,” and “The People” can help rebuild public trust and strengthen social cohesion (2).

The practical recommendation of this research is to reassess official media strategies, employ modern narrative and framing techniques, and systematically incorporate discourse analysis in order to counter external hegemonies and regenerate meaning within the Iranian media and social sphere.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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