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Original Article

## From guidance to control: Exploring manipulative behaviours in supervisor-student interactions. A qualitative multi-case study."

*Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa*

*Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa*

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### Abstract Background

Postgraduate supervision is expected to foster academic growth, ethical research practice, and intellectual independence. However, supervisory relationships may also become sites of power abuse, where manipulative behaviours undermine student autonomy, delay academic progress, and negatively affect well-being. This study explored manifestations of manipulative supervision within South African higher education institutions and examined their implications for postgraduate students and research ethics.

### Methods

A qualitative multi-case study was conducted at two public universities between February and April 2024. A purposive sample of 24 participants was selected, comprising 14 postgraduate students (8 Master's and 6 PhD candidates) and 10 academic supervisors from the faculties of Science, Education, and Social Sciences. Data were generated through 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework.

### Results

Four interrelated themes emerged. First, academic gatekeeping was evident through delayed feedback, excessive revisions, and shifting expectations, which students perceived as mechanisms to control progression. Second, exploitation of student research was reported, with students describing pressure to include supervisors as authors or to prioritise supervisors' publication agendas over their own research goals. Third, emotional manipulation and favouritism manifested through selective support, intimidation, and conditional approval, contributing to anxiety, self-doubt, and isolation among students. Finally, a lack of institutional recourse was identified, as students expressed fear of retaliation and limited confidence in existing grievance mechanisms. Some supervisors acknowledged power imbalances but framed these practices as necessary for academic rigor and training.

### Conclusion

Manipulative supervisory practices, whether intentional or normalized, undermine postgraduate development, ethical research conduct, and student well-being, and contribute to the persistence of inequitable academic cultures.

### Recommendations

Clear supervision guidelines, transparent supervisory agreements, regular feedback channels, and stronger institutional accountability mechanisms are essential to promote ethical, supportive, and transformative postgraduate supervision environments.

**Keywords:** Supervisor-student relationships; postgraduate supervision; academic manipulation; higher education; power dynamics; ethical supervision; South Africa; qualitative study

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**Corresponding Author:** Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

**Email:** [mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za](mailto:mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za)

*Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa.*

### Background Information

Postgraduate supervision plays a pivotal role in shaping the scholarly development, research productivity, and academic identity of emerging scholars. It serves as a cornerstone of higher education's contribution to

knowledge generation, intellectual growth, and academic citizenship. Ideally, the supervisory relationship is characterized by mutual respect, intellectual collaboration, and the ethical transmission of disciplinary norms and research practices. It is expected to foster a safe



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and nurturing environment where students are supported in developing critical thinking, research autonomy, and scholarly confidence. Supervision, when executed effectively, becomes a transformative academic and personal journey for students. However, growing empirical and anecdotal evidence reveals that this ideal is not always realized. In practice, the supervisory relationship can be undermined by covert, manipulative behaviours that shift the dynamic from mentorship to control. These behaviours, while often subtle and difficult to quantify, include delayed or strategic withholding of feedback, emotional manipulation, intellectual exploitation (such as claiming authorship on students' work without appropriate contribution), and preferential treatment of certain students. Such practices can lead to environments of anxiety, disempowerment, and silence, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

In the context of South Africa's post-apartheid transformation agenda in higher education, where institutions are under pressure to decolonize curricula, diversify academic staff, and promote equity and inclusion, these supervisory challenges take on a deeper significance. Manipulative supervision not only impedes academic progress but also perpetuates institutional cultures of hierarchy and exclusion. It can reinforce historical power asymmetries, particularly along lines of race, gender, language, and socioeconomic status, thereby obstructing genuine transformation and redress. While a substantial body of research has examined supervision styles, models (such as the functional, pastoral, or contractual approaches), and the structural challenges within postgraduate education, such as supervisor availability, funding constraints, and workload imbalances, there remains a critical gap in the literature on the less visible, often unspoken, forms of manipulation that exist within supervisory relationships. These dynamics are frequently normalized or dismissed under the guise of academic rigor or professional expectation, making them harder to challenge institutionally. This study seeks to address this lacuna by exploring the manifestations of supervisory manipulation, how they are experienced and interpreted by both postgraduate students and supervisors, and what systemic and institutional factors sustain or inhibit such behaviour. Understanding these dynamics is vital for informing policies, capacity development programmes, and ethical guidelines that promote just, transparent, and empowering supervision in South African higher education and beyond.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore the nature and forms of manipulative behavior in supervisor-student interactions in postgraduate education.
- To understand how manipulative supervision affects postgraduate students' academic progress and psychological well-being.
- To examine institutional mechanisms (or the lack thereof) for preventing and responding to supervisory abuse.
- To propose strategies that promote ethical and empowering postgraduate supervision practices.

### **Methodology Study Design**

This research adopted a qualitative multi-case study design, allowing for in-depth exploration of supervisory manipulation across different institutional contexts. A case study approach was appropriate for capturing complex interpersonal dynamics, contextual factors, and institutional cultures shaping supervisor-student relationships.

### **Study Setting**

The study was conducted at three anonymised public universities in South Africa, representing diverse institutional profiles. These included University A, a historically disadvantaged university focused on technology and applied sciences; University B, a multi-campus institution offering programmes in applied sciences, business, and the arts; and University C, a research-intensive university with extensive postgraduate offerings across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Data collection took place over three months, from February to April 2024.

### **Participants and Sample Description**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases. A total of 24 participants were enrolled, comprising 14 postgraduate students (8 Master's and 6 PhD candidates) and 10 academic supervisors. The sample included 13 females and 11 males, with ages ranging from 26 to 58 years (mean age: 38 years). Postgraduate students ranged from 26 to 41 years, while supervisors ranged from 35 to 58 years.

### **Inclusion criteria were:**

- Master's or PhD students currently enrolled or having completed within the past two years, with at least one year of supervision experience.



- Academic supervisors with a minimum of three years of postgraduate supervision experience.
- Willingness to discuss supervisory experiences.

#### **Exclusion criteria included:**

- Honours or undergraduate students.
- Supervisors with less than three years of postgraduate supervision experience.
- Individuals unwilling to provide informed consent.

#### **Recruitment and non-participation**

Participants were recruited through departmental referrals, snowball sampling, and direct email invitations. Of the 29 individuals initially approached, 3 declined participation due to time constraints, and 2 did not respond to follow-up invitations. No participants withdrew after consenting, and there were no dropouts during data collection.

#### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using two qualitative methods:

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with all 24 participants, lasting 45–60 minutes each.
- Two focus group discussions (one with students and one with supervisors), each comprising 5–6 participants, were conducted to validate and deepen emerging themes.

#### **Interview Guide and Pilot Testing**

The semi-structured interview guide was pilot tested with two postgraduate students and one supervisor who were not part of the final sample. Feedback from the pilot informed refinement of question wording, sequencing, and clarity, ensuring neutrality and relevance while avoiding leading questions. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

#### **Bias and Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were employed to minimise bias and enhance trustworthiness:

- Data triangulation through interviews and focus groups.

- Researcher reflexivity, supported by analytic memo-writing.
- Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, encouraging candid responses.
- Peer debriefing during theme development to reduce interpretive bias.

#### **Study Size Justification**

The sample size of 24 participants was guided by the principle of thematic saturation, where no new themes emerged with additional data. Saturation was reached within each institutional case and across participant groups.

#### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. NVivo 12 software supported data organisation and coding. As this was a qualitative study, no statistical analyses were performed.

#### **Ethical Consideration**

The study received full ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Mangosuthu University of Technology on 11 February 2023. Participants were given detailed informed consent forms outlining the voluntary nature of participation, data confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

#### **Results**

##### **Data Coders**

The qualitative data were coded independently by two researchers with qualitative research training. Initial coding was conducted separately, after which the coders met to compare codebooks, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus. This process enhanced analytic rigor and reliability. A third senior academic acted as an independent auditor, reviewing the final themes for coherence and credibility.

##### **Coding Tree Description**

The coding process followed an inductive approach. Initial open codes were generated from the transcripts, clustered into categories, and then refined into overarching themes.



**Table 1: Coding Tree Showing Codes, Categories, and Themes**

Initial Codes	Categories	Major Themes
Delayed feedback, repeated revisions, and changing expectations	Control of academic progress	Academic gatekeeping and delayed feedback
Authorship pressure, use of student data, forced alignment with supervisor agenda	Research exploitation	Exploitation of student research
Intimidation, emotional pressure, selective support	Psychological influence	Emotional manipulation and favouritism
Fear of reporting, lack of grievance clarity, and retaliation concerns	Institutional barriers	Lack of institutional recourse

### Major Themes and Supporting Quotations

#### Theme 1: Academic Gatekeeping and Delayed Feedback

Participants described deliberate delays in feedback, excessive revisions, and shifting requirements as mechanisms that restricted progress and reinforced supervisory control.

“I would wait months for feedback, and when it finally came, the goalposts had moved again. It felt intentional.” (Student 03, Master’s)

“Some students need pressure; otherwise, they become complacent. Delays are sometimes part of training.” (Supervisor 07)

This theme illustrates how feedback processes were used as tools of authority rather than mentorship.

#### Theme 2: Exploitation of Student Research

Students reported that their work was sometimes used to advance supervisors’ publication records, with limited recognition or consent.

“My data appeared in a paper before my thesis was submitted. I was listed as a second author without discussion.” (Student 11, PhD)

“Students benefit from being associated with publications, even if they don’t fully understand the process.” (Supervisor 02)

These findings point to blurred ethical boundaries regarding ownership of intellectual labour.

#### Theme 3: Emotional Manipulation and Favouritism

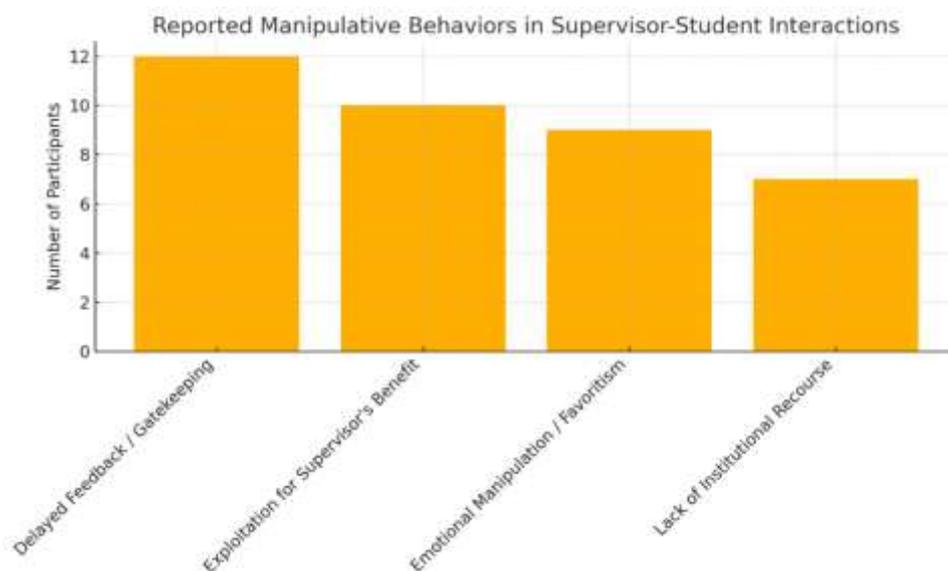
Participants highlighted emotional pressure, intimidation, and selective support as shaping unequal supervisory experiences.

“If you questioned anything, you were labelled difficult. Others were clearly favoured.” (Student 06, Master’s)  
“I support students who show commitment. Some interpret that as favouritism.” (Supervisor 09)  
Such dynamics contributed to anxiety, self-censorship, and emotional distress among students.

#### Theme 4: Lack of Institutional Recourse

Students expressed limited confidence in institutional mechanisms for addressing supervisory misconduct.  
“Reporting felt risky. Supervisors sit on the same committees that decide our fate.” (Student 14, PhD)  
“There is no clear pathway for handling complaints without damaging relationships.” (Supervisor 05)  
This theme underscores systemic gaps that perpetuate silence and power imbalance.

Figure 1 presents the number of participants who reported specific manipulative behaviours. The bar chart clearly illustrates that “Delayed Feedback and Gatekeeping” was the most frequently reported issue, with 12 participants highlighting it. This is followed closely by “Exploitation for Supervisor’s Benefit” (10 participants) and “Emotional Manipulation and Favouritism” (9 participants). The least reported, though still significant, was “Lack of Institutional Recourse”, mentioned by 7 participants. Figure 1 quantitatively emphasizes the prevalence of supervisory delays and passive obstruction, often used to exert control. It provides clear empirical support for the qualitative themes and points to specific areas where interventions are urgently needed. The relatively high frequency of all four issues suggests these behaviours are not isolated incidents but part of broader systemic concerns in postgraduate supervision.

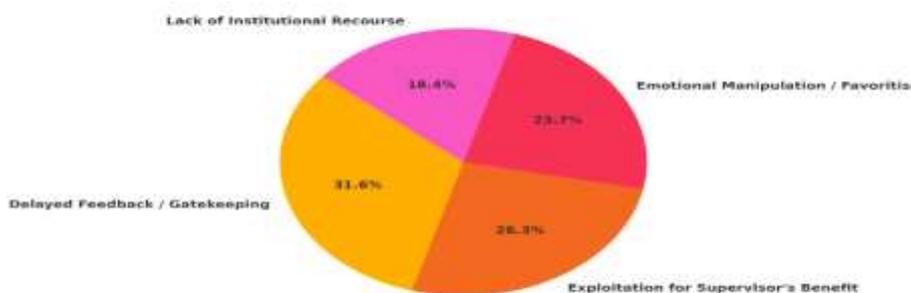


**Figure 1: The graph above illustrates the frequency with which each manipulative supervisory behavior was reported by participants in the study.**

Figure 2 provides a proportional representation of the same data in Figure 1. Delayed Feedback and Gatekeeping account for the largest segment (50%), clearly dominating the manipulative practices landscape. Exploitation for Personal Benefit (42%) and Emotional Manipulation (38%) also represent substantial portions. Lack of Recourse contributes around 29%, showing that while less frequently mentioned, it is still a critical

concern. Figure 2 is useful for quickly visualizing the relative weight of each behaviour in the overall picture of supervisory manipulation. It reinforces the finding that most manipulative behaviours revolve around control of academic progress and intellectual outputs. The visualization also underscores that these issues are interconnected; each behaviour reinforces or enables the others.

Distribution of Reported Manipulative Behaviors in Supervision



**Figure 2: The graph shows the proportional distribution of reported manipulative behaviours in supervisor-student interactions.**

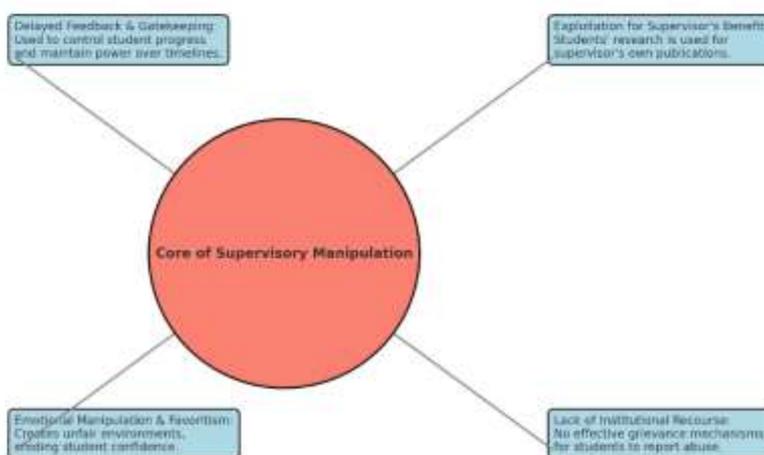
Figure 3 offers a conceptual model that links the four key manipulative behaviours to a central theme: “Core of Supervisory Manipulation.” Each outer box explains how the behaviour manifests and its impact on student experience. The arrows leading inward suggest that these behaviours are mechanisms supervisors use to maintain academic dominance.

- Delayed feedback controls timelines.
- Exploitation converts student work into personal academic gain.

- Emotional manipulation undermines confidence and promotes dependency.
- Lack of institutional recourse allows abuse to go unchallenged.

Figure 3 is essential for showing not just *what* the issues are, but *how* and *why* they persist. It transforms the abstract concepts into a structured logic that highlights institutional vulnerability. It also suggests that unless the central “core” of manipulation is addressed through policy, mentorship reform, and accountability, each of the surrounding behaviours will continue to occur.

Justification of Manipulative Behaviors in Supervision



**Figure 3: The conceptual diagram visually justifies the key themes of manipulative supervisory behaviours.**

### Discussion

The present study examined manipulative behaviours within supervisor-student relationships in postgraduate education, revealing a pattern of subtle but significant power abuse that undermines student autonomy and research progress. The findings are discussed below with reference to Figures 1 (bar chart), 2 (pie chart), and 3 (conceptual justification diagram), and compared with relevant literature.

#### Prevalence and Patterns of Manipulative Behaviors

In Figure 1, the most frequently reported issue was delayed feedback and academic gatekeeping, mentioned by 50% of participants. This practice reflects a form of passive control, where supervisors delay approval or remain unresponsive, thereby halting student progress. Such findings are consistent with Backhouse (2009) and Manathunga (2007), who identified time-related control and silence as tools of domination in postgraduate supervision. According to these authors, this form of manipulation not only delays graduation but also erodes student confidence and fosters dependency.

Figure 2 further illustrates the proportional dominance of delayed feedback, followed by exploitation of student work (42%), emotional manipulation and favoritism (38%), and lack of institutional recourse (29%). This

distribution highlights that while exploitation and emotional abuse are slightly less frequent, they remain widespread and damaging. Lee (2008) similarly reported that the absence of clear authorship agreements and the misuse of student data for personal publication gain is a recurring problem in academia, especially where power differentials are pronounced. The conceptual justification diagram (Figure 3) strengthens these insights by mapping how each theme contributes to the core of supervisory manipulation. The model illustrates that these behaviours are not isolated; rather, they form a mutually reinforcing system. Supervisors who gatekeep feedback can more easily exploit students' research, particularly in environments lacking institutional checks and balances. This aligns with Wisker and Robinson (2013), who noted that manipulation often goes unreported because of students' fear of retaliation and a lack of trusted reporting pathways.

#### Institutional and Psychological Impacts

The emotional consequences of supervisory manipulation were also significant. As several participants noted, favouritism and inconsistent emotional treatment created a climate of uncertainty and mental fatigue. This aligns with Cornér, Löfström, and Pyhältö (2017), who



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emphasize that students subjected to hostile or unbalanced supervision are at higher risk of academic burnout and attrition. The themes in this study echo their argument that emotional manipulation in supervision is both psychologically harmful and academically counterproductive. Lack of institutional recourse, although reported less frequently than other themes, is perhaps the most structurally damaging. As illustrated in Figure 3, it serves as the enabling mechanism for all other behaviors. When students have no safe or effective means to report abuse or seek mediation, a culture of silence persists. Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry (2004) previously noted that universities often prioritize the reputations of senior academics over the protection of vulnerable students, contributing to the normalization of unethical practices.

### **Broader Implications and Comparative Reflections**

The study's findings affirm the observations of Manathunga (2014), who advocates for ethical supervision practices grounded in collegiality and transparency. The persistent patterns of manipulation uncovered in this study suggest that current mentorship models may be outdated or inadequately enforced. Moreover, McAlpine and Amundsen (2011) argue that effective supervision must be dialogic, participatory, and centered on student development, values often absent in the cases discussed here. Unlike previous studies that generalized supervisory challenges as communication gaps or workload issues, this study exposes manipulation as a deliberate or systemic behaviour, not merely the result of mismanagement or poor coordination. The use of visual data (Figures 1–3) further supports this by illustrating both the quantitative prevalence and the qualitative logic behind these harmful supervisory dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

The integration of qualitative feedback and thematic analysis with graphical data presentation reveals a consistent and systemic pattern of manipulative supervision behaviours. These findings call for urgent institutional reforms to ensure transparency, fairness, and student empowerment in postgraduate supervision. Comparing the results with previous literature confirms that such issues are deeply embedded in academic culture and require both policy-level interventions and attitudinal shifts among supervisors. This study revealed that manipulative supervisory behaviors are a significant yet often unspoken problem in postgraduate education. Through a multi-case qualitative analysis of two South African universities, it was found that supervisory

manipulation often manifests in the form of delayed feedback, exploitation of student work, emotional manipulation, and the absence of institutional support mechanisms. These behaviours not only delay academic progress but also undermine the psychological well-being and autonomy of postgraduate students. The findings suggest that manipulation in supervision is not merely a by-product of miscommunication but a structured form of control embedded in academic hierarchies and institutional cultures.

### **Limitation**

While the study offers valuable insights into covert manipulative practices in postgraduate supervision, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size and scope were relatively limited, involving a purposive sample of 24 participants from two universities. This narrow representation constrains the generalizability of the findings and limits the breadth of institutional perspectives captured. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias, as participants' accounts were shaped by their personal experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses arising from supervisory relationships. Lastly, institutional non-disclosure posed a challenge, as concerns about anonymity and potential repercussions led some participants to limit the extent of information shared, which affected the depth and completeness of the data.

### **Recommendations**

To address manipulative supervisory practices and promote ethical postgraduate mentorship, universities must adopt a multi-pronged strategy that fosters transparency, accountability, and student well-being. Firstly, institutions should develop clear and enforceable Supervision Codes of Conduct that define the boundaries of ethical supervision, particularly regarding authorship rights, timely feedback, and appropriate emotional engagement. These guidelines should be widely disseminated and integrated into institutional policy. Secondly, supervisors should undergo mandatory, continuous professional development that focuses on ethical mentoring practices, an understanding of power asymmetries, and sensitivity to students' mental health and emotional well-being. Thirdly, the use of formal supervision contracts should be encouraged; these agreements should clearly articulate mutual roles, responsibilities, expectations, and feedback timelines, serving as reference points in the event of disputes. Fourthly, institutions must establish accessible and confidential grievance mechanisms, such as ombudsperson offices and anonymous reporting tools,



that empower students to report unethical supervisory conduct without fear of victimization. Lastly, ongoing monitoring and accountability measures should be implemented, including regular evaluations of supervision quality through student feedback, peer review, and institutional audits. Together, these interventions can cultivate a more just, respectful, and supportive supervisory culture within higher education.

### Generalizability

Given its qualitative, context-specific design, the findings of this study are not statistically generalizable to all South African universities. However, the thematic patterns observed are analytically transferable to similar higher education contexts characterized by hierarchical academic structures and weak accountability systems. Future research with larger, cross-institutional samples could offer more generalizable conclusions.

### Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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### Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research

were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,

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