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Intermolecular forces and assembly strategies in porphyrin-based electrochemiluminescence: Mechanisms and future prospects

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The exploration of innovative luminophores is critical for enhancing the efficiency and stability of electro-chemiluminescence (ECL). Porphyrins, with their superior optical and electrical properties, have emerged as promising organic ECL emitters. The tunable functional groups of the porphyrins facilitate their assembly into ordered structures, thereby reducing aggregation-caused quenching (ACQ) and achieving desirable photo-physical properties. This review introduces the effect of central metal and peripheral substituents of porphyrins on their ECL properties. It then summarizes various assembly strategies for developing enhanced porphyrin-based ECL emitters, focusing on the intermolecular forces introduced by the porphyrin ring, the central metal and peripheral substituents. By correlating characterization and ECL results, the structure-activity relationship between porphyrin assembly structure and ECL performance is analyzed, providing significant reference and guidance for the future design of organic ECL emitters. Finally, current challenges and future perspectives for the construction of porphyrin-based ECL emitters are discussed.

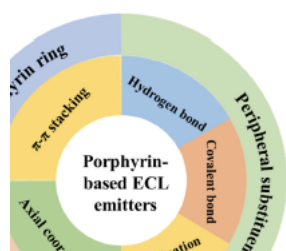
Electrochemiluminescence (ECL) is an electrochemically triggered chemiluminescence (CL) reaction in which the excited state is generated by electron transfer between highly reactive radical species formed during the electrochemical process [1,2]. The combination of CL and electrochemistry provides ECL technology with unique advantages, such as the elimination of the need for additional light sources, spatio-temporal controllability, and extremely high signal-to-noise ratios, leading to a wide range of applications in biomedical and diagnostic fields [3–8]. Exploring innovative luminophores is critical for enhancing ECL efficiency and stability. In designing novel ECL emitters, scientists often draw inspiration for natural phenomena. A typical example is the bioluminescence of fireflies, where luciferase catalyzes the reaction between luciferin and oxygen to emit light. Inspired by such natural light emission processes, suitable organic compounds are considered promising candidates for achieving efficient and environmentally friendly light emission through specific chemical reactions [9,10].

Porphyrins are a class of macromolecular heterocyclic compounds with a rigid planar structure comprising the  $\alpha$ -carbon atoms of four organisms, porphyrins and their derivatives play key roles in photo-synthesis and hemoglobin, demonstrating their natural advantages in light absorption and conversion processes [12,13]. Due to their wide spectral response, structural stability, ease of preparation and functionalization, and high luminescence

efficiency, porphyrin-based molecules are ideal candidates for the design of novel ECL emitters [14–17]. However, the ECL emission efficiency of most organic emitters, including porphyrins, is often hindered by aggregation-induced quenching (ACQ). The diverse intermolecular forces associated with the porphyrin ring, central metal, and peripheral substituents enable porphyrins to assemble into various structures, effectively mitigating ACQ and achieving desirable photophysical properties. From a molecular perspective, the structure of porphyrins and their derivatives offer several remarkable advantages for the assembly of novel ECL emitters: (1) The planar macrocyclic structure enhances the structural stability of the porphyrins and facilitates their assembly on the conducting and catalytic materials via  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking [18]. (2) Porphyrin molecules can coordinate with various metal ions to form metalloporphyrins, with the central metal tunability providing different optical and electrical

properties [19]. Moreover, the linking ability of the metal center allows porphyrins to be assembled into ordered structures. (3) The porphyrin macrocycle can be substituted with numerous functional groups at the mid- or  $\beta$ -position, allowing tailored properties through molecular engineering, including improved solubility and tuned electronic properties, and assembly into ordered structures to reduce aggregation-caused quenching (ACQ) [20–22]. This review first focused on the effect of central metal and peripheral substituents of porphyrins on their ECL properties. It then details the design strategies for enhanced porphyrin-based ECL emitters based on different intermolecular forces introduced by the porphyrin ring, central metal, and peripheral substituents (Scheme 1). Finally, the future perspectives for the construction of porphyrin-based ECL emitters are discussed.

Porphyrins, as a class of macromolecular heterocyclic compounds with rigid planar structures, naturally exhibit  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking forces, enabling them to spontaneously form ordered aggregates [18]. M. R. Wasielewski's group synthesized the monodisperse aggregates consisting of five molecules arranged in a columnar stack through the self-assembly of zinc tetraphenylporphyrin with four bisimide perylene groups, utilizing intermolecular  $\pi$ - $\pi$  interaction [23]. Besides self-assembly,  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking allows porphyrins to be assembled on conducting or catalytic materials, thereby increasing the electron transfer rate in the ECL process. Shan's group has constructed an efficient bio-mimetic catalyst (CoPPIX@C3N4), assembled from ultrathin carbon nitride nanosheets (C3N4) and cobalt porphyrin, through partial  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking between pyrrole subunits of porphyrin and heptazine of C3N4. This catalyst exhibits excellent electrocatalytic capabilities comparable to those of conventional peroxidases (Fig. 1) [24]. Similarly, Mao's group enhanced ECL intensity by compositing zinc-metal organic frameworks (Zn-MOF) with graphene oxide (GO), which accelerates the electron transfer rate [25].



### 3. Central metal-based assembly strategy

#### 3.1. Effect of central metal on ECL reaction

Porphyrins can coordinate with various cations, including most transition metals, forming a square-planar structure. Porphyrins lacking metal cations are referred to as free-base porphyrins. Among metal-lporphyrins, iron porphyrin, cobalt porphyrin, and manganese porphyrin serve as electrocatalysts for numerous small molecules involved in biological processes [26]. However, their luminescence capacity is insufficient. In contrast, free-base porphyrins and zinc porphyrins are excellent candidates for ECL luminophores due to their reversible redox ability and superior photoelectrochemical properties [27,28]. Various researchers have investigated the ECL performance and mechanism of free-base porphyrins and different metalloporphyrins.

Shan's group was the first to explore the cathodic ECL mechanism of singlet oxygen ( $^1O_2$ ) induced by the electroactive zinc porphyrin in an aqueous medium. They propose that only the electroactive intermediate  $Zn^{•+}TCPP^{•-}$ , and not  $TCPP^{•-}$  or  $TCPP^{2-}$ , can oxidize  $O_2$  to produce  $^1O_2$ , attributed to the intermediate valence state  $Zn^{•+}$  coordinated to porphyrin ring [29]. Lu's group systematically investigated the oxygen-involved ECL mechanism of metal porphyrins and metal-free porphyrins. For metal-free porphyrins, the anodic ECL emission arises from the collision between  $OH^•$  and porphyrin radical anions. For metal porphyrins, the generated  $O_2^{•-}$  cannot be further converted into  $H_2O$  due to the absence of proton in the porphyrin ring. Therefore,  $O_2^{•-}$  reacts directly with the porphyrin radical anion, resulting in cathodic ECL emission (Fig. 2A) [30]. The influence of the central metal on the porphyrin extends beyond the oxygen-involved ECL process. Coordinated metal ions can increase the conformational rigidity of porphyrin molecules and reduce the energy loss via bond vibration. Among transition metals,  $Zn^{2+}$  with a  $d_{10}$  orbital is particularly suitable as a porphyrin center metal for ECL reactions, whereas other metal ions with a single electron in the eg orbital tend to quench the ECL spectra. Cui's group discovered that post-synthesis modification with  $Zn^{2+}$  on nonmetal porphyrin-based MOFs resulted in a staggering amplification of ECL intensity by approximately 19–50 fold when using potassium persulfate as a coreactant (Fig. 2B) [31].

### 3.2. Central metal dominated assembly structure

Various zinc porphyrin-based ECL luminophores have been developed due to their excellent ECL performance. More importantly, the linking ability of the metal center allows porphyrins to be assembled into ordered structures. Shan's group reported the construction of one-dimensional nanostructures (SA-ZnTPyP) formed by the self-assembly of zinc tetra (4-pyridyl) porphine (ZnTPyP), where the dominant force was changed from  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking to Zn–N axial coordination with the assistance of surfactant. In the ZnTPyP- $H_2O_2$  ECL system, the existence of  $Zn^{•+}/Zn^0$  transition and  $•OH$  groups, which are produced by  $Zn^{2+}/Zn^{•+}$  transition, plays an essential role. When  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking is the dominant force, the active sites ( $Zn^{2+}$ ) cannot have full access to the co-reactant  $H_2O_2$ , leading to weak ECL emission. When Zn–N axial coordination is the dominant force, the coexisting bonding forces result in more active sites exposed and the facilitated mass transfer, thereby reducing the ACQ effect and improving the ECL performance (Fig. 3A) [32]. Additionally, the central metal linkage enables stable grafting onto carrier material to mitigate the ACQ effect. Deng's group encapsulated zinc porphyrin within a pyridine-bridged  $\beta$ -cyclodextrin dimer (Py(CD) $_2$ ), utilizing the axial ligation between the pyridyl N and  $Zn^{2+}$  in porphyrin ring. This configuration exhibits significantly enhanced ECL activity compared to the zinc porphyrin alone (Fig. 3B) [33]. Moreover, they employed a pyrrolidiny C60 imidazolyl artefact as a congruent nano-center to converge three zinc porphyrins onto its monopole through the axial attachment of imidazole N of C60 derivatives and the central metal of the porphyrin ring [34].



#### 4.2.1. Hydrogen bond

Porphyryns with substituents such as hydroxyl and carboxyl groups can form assemblies through hydrogen bonding. By regulating the dominant forces during the assembly process from  $\pi$ - $\pi$  interactions to van der Waals forces or hydrogen bonding, the assembled structure of porphyryns can change from H-type aggregates (face-to-face) to J-type aggregates (edge-to-edge) [18]. Compared to the monomer and H-aggregates, the absorption spectra of the J-aggregates are red-shifted, corresponding to the reduced energy gap ( $E_g$ ) between the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) (Fig. 5A1). The lower LUMO-HOMO bandgap facilitates electron transfer and recombination of electron-hole pairs, resulting in stronger ECL emission. Fu's group constructed J-aggregated porphyryns as robust organic luminophores with the assistance of an anionic surfactant sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS). In this ECL system, the TCPP aggregate is the primary luminophore, and the ZnO@Cys NFs can be used as a new energy donor and coreactant accelerator. In the presence of ZnO@Cys NFs, the coreactant  $S_2O_8^{2-}$  can

oxidize TCPP to produce the excited state TCPP\* (Fig. 5A2) [37].

Moreover, porphyryns can be loaded or anchored on host materials through hydrogen bonding to attenuate the ACQ effect.  $\beta$ -cyclodextrin ( $\beta$ -CD) has a hollow conical structure with a lipophilic cavity and a hydrophilic outer surface containing hydroxyl groups [38,39]. Lu's group reported a novel depolymerization-induced ECL (DIECL) strategy achieved through the self-assembly of THPP and  $\beta$ -CD via hydrogen bonding of hydroxyl groups [40]. By grafting THPP onto the hydrophilic outer surface of  $\beta$ -CD, the insolubility and aggregation of THPP in aqueous solution were greatly improved, resulting in bright depolymerization-induced ECL emission (Fig. 5B).

#### 4.2.2. Covalent bond

Beyond hydrogen bonding, porphyryn derivatives can be modified with other functional materials via condensation reactions to obtain desirable electrochemical and optical properties. For example, porphyryns can be linked via peripheral substituents to luminophores whose emission spectra overlap with the porphyryn absorption spectrum, thus improving ECL emission efficiency through efficient energy resonance transfer [41,42]. Additionally, by linking porphyryns to electron-donating or electron-withdrawing molecules, the HOMO and LUMO energy levels of porphyryn-based complexes can be tuned, affecting the electron transfer and recombination of processes in the ECL reaction [43,44]. Lu's group decorated an aggregation-induced emission (AIE)-active chromophore, tetraphenylethene, (TPE), on porphyryn (ATPP) with ACQ properties via a simple Schiff base reaction synthesis method [45]. The non-planar structure between the ATPP core and the TPE peripheral molecules dramatically eliminated the detrimental  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking of ATPP to eliminate the ACQ effect. In the ECL process, ATPP-TPE and  $K_2S_2O_8$  is reduced to ATPP-TPE $\cdot^-$  and  $SO_4^{\cdot-}$ . Subsequently, an electron transfer reaction between ATPP-TPE $\cdot^-$  and  $SO_4^{\cdot-}$  occurs in the vicinity of the electrode to generate ATPP-TPE\* (Fig. 6A1). More importantly, the efficient resonance energy transfer from the aggregated TPE molecule to the ATPP imparted AIE-active behavior to reduced HOMO-LUMO gap compared to ATPP, which is conducive to electron-transfer reactions on the electrode (Fig. 6A3).

Considering that ECL is an electrochemically triggered chem-illuminescence reaction, the generation efficiency of reactive intermediates is one of primary factors limiting the coreactant ECL reaction. Covalently linking the porphyryn to materials with electro-catalytic capability can effectively enhance the catalytic efficiency from the coreactants to the active

intermediates. The abundance of linkable groups on metal-organic framework (MOF) materials allows porphyrins to be covalently linked via peripheral substituents, preventing ACQ in the aqueous phase. The porous structures and electrocatalytic capability of MOFs can enrich coreactants and promote electron transfer in ECL reaction [46,47]. Feng's group attached zinc protoporphyrin IX (ZnP) to an aminated ZIF-8 (ZnP-NH-ZIF-8) utilizing an amide condensation reaction. Benefiting from the enhanced oxygen affinity of ZIF-8, the ECL signal of ZnP-NH-ZIF-8 exhibited a 153-fold enhancement (Fig. 7A) [48]. Building on this, they used pyridine-containing zinc-based MOFs (Zn-Bp-MOFs) as effective carriers, where zinc porphyrin (Zn-TP) was assembled via sulfonamide bonds. Zn-Bp-MOFs, with conjugated bipyridine and ordered assembly structures, demonstrate high electro-catalytic performance towards the coreactant (K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub>) and increased photoelectrons on the Zn-TP, resulting in boosted ECL efficiency (Fig. 7B) [49].

#### 4.2.3. Coordination bond

A coordination bond is a special type of covalent bond where the shared electron pair is supplied by one of the atoms alone. Assembling metals and luminophores into ordered MOFs by coordination bond is an effective strategy to construct robust and efficient ECL emitters. Introducing porphyrins as ligands into MOFs not only prevents their aggregation in the aqueous phase, but also maximizes the integration of functional units, reducing the percentage of inactive components [50, 51].

luminophores to be fully exposed and the coreactants to be enriched in the pores and channels [52–54]. More importantly, due to the tunability of the central metal and ligand, MOFs can integrate coreaction accelerators and luminophores, thereby reducing the energy loss during the ECL reaction and obtaining enhanced ECL emission [55]. Strategy by introducing TCPP as a ligand into the framework (PCN-224), resulting in ECL and photoluminescence (PL) efficiencies that was 8.2 and 6.5 times higher than those of TCPP alone, respectively [56]. Based on the enrichment of coreactants in the channels of MOFs, Shan's group

developed a stable microporous zirconium zinc porphyrin MOF (MOF-525-Zn) as a three-in-one platform comprising of oxygen nanocages, electronic mediators, and bonding sites for ECL protein kinase activity assays (Fig. 8A) [57]. By utilizing on the enrichment of oxygen through the porous and multi-channel structure of MOFs, the electro-active center ZnTCPP can effectively react with the oxygen molecules to generate singlet oxygen and produce enhanced ECL signal.

The specific surface areas, pore sizes, structures, and surface charge states of MOFs can be adjusted by simply changing the reaction time. By optimizing the condition of the hydrothermal reaction, Liu's group acquired PCN-222 with a large surface area, abundant micropores, good conductivity, and positively charged surfaces, which are favorable for boosting ECL performance (Fig. 8B) [58].

Compared to 3D MOF crystals, 2D MOF nanosheets with larger surface areas and highly exposed active sites have emerged as promising candidates for ECL emitters. However, due to the  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking effect, 2D porphyrin-based MOFs are prone to stacking, which leads to aggregate formation [27,59]. To modulate the assembly process of MOFs, suitable surfactants or small molecules have been introduced to regulate the morphology of 2D MOFs, reduce the interlayer aggregation, induce the anisotropic growth of MOF sheets, and expose more active sites, thereby improving ECL performance. For surfactant-induced depolymerization, Zhang's group synthesized 2D porphyrinic MOF nanosheets with the

assistance of surfactant polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP), displaying cathodic ECL derived from singlet oxygen [60]. For small molecules regulation, Shan's group obtained nanosized TCPP-Zn-BPS by introducing the capping agent bath-ophenanthrolinedisulfonic acid disodium salt (BPS) and adjusting the solvent (DMF/H<sub>2</sub>O) ratio to limit the crystal growth of Zn-TCPP (Fig. 9A) [61]. Moreover, Zhu's team investigated the effects of different small molecule ligands on the morphology, structure, and ECL properties of 2D MOFs. The height of 2D Zn-TCPP MOFs was significantly reduced upon the addition of benzoic acid (BA) and 4,4'-biphenyldicarboxylic acid (BPDC) as regulators, with the ECL signals being negatively correlated to the height of the MOFs (Fig. 9B) [62].

Additionally, MOFs are suitable platforms for assembling donor-acceptor pairs in ordered arrays to shorten the energy transfer distance, resulting in efficient ECL resonance energy transfer (ECL-RET) [63]. This system enables the energy from multiple donors to be concentrated on a single acceptor, amplifying the luminescence of the acceptor. The ECL-RET system can be divided into ligand-ligand energy transfer and metal-ligand energy transfer. In constructing an ECL-RET system between ligands, Shan's group reported a novel ECL amplification system (ZIF-9-ZnTCPP) based on ECL-RET between benzimidazole (BIM) and ZnTCPP (Fig. 10A1) [64]. The abundant BIM structure surrounding ZnTCPP allows the energy from multiple BIM donors to be concentrated on a single ZnTCPP acceptor, thus amplifying the ECL emission of the acceptor. Specifically, ZnTCPP undergoes two reduction processes to produce ZnTCPP<sup>2•-</sup>, while BIM undergoes redox and annihilation reaction to produce BIM\*.

In the ECL-RET amplification, ZnTCPP<sup>2•-</sup> during the return process of the excited state, causing the decay of the ZIF-9 emission and the amplification of ZnTCPP emission (Fig. 10A2).

Selecting lanthanide ions (Ln<sup>3+</sup>) with optical properties as MOFs center metals allows the construction of an ECL-RET system between the metal and the ligand. Due to the high coordination number, high connectivity, and diverse coordination modes, Ln<sup>3+</sup> ions have great potential for the construction of various MOFs [65,66]. According to the hard-soft acid-base theory, Ln<sup>3+</sup> ions have an affinity for relatively hard oxygenated linkers, enabling them to coordinate with carboxy porphyrins to form stable MOF structures [67]. Fu's group synthesized europium-chelated porphyrin coordination polymers (Eu-PCP) via a simple and reliable solvothermal method (Fig. 10B) [68]. Eu-PCP achieved high and stable ECL emission (673 nm) at low potential (1.1 V vs Ag/AgCl) with peroxydisulfate (S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub><sup>2-</sup>) solution as coreactant.

The above-mentioned strategies primarily improve the optical properties of ECL emitters through depolymerization-induced ECL and ECL-RET techniques. However, the electrocatalytic capability is also a critical factor limiting ECL performance. If active intermediates are solely catalyzed from coreactants by applying a voltage at the electrode surface, issues such as slow electron transfer and low efficiency arise. Coreactant accelerators act as catalyst that convert coreactants into active intermediates, significantly enhancing the generation efficiency of these intermediates when introduced into the ECL system [69,70]. This provides a simple, efficient, and low-cost method for signal amplification. MOFs are suitable platforms for integrating co-reactant accelerators and luminophores, effectively increasing the generation rate of reactive intermediates and shortening the distance between radicals and luminophores. Shan's group synthesized a composite material (Co-2-MI-ZnTCPP) integrating co-reactant accelerators (Co-N) and luminophore groups via a simple ligand exchange strategy. Coreactants (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>), reactive intermediates can be



in situ generated and accumulated in situ, which then react with porphyrin anion radicals to achieve self-enhanced ECL emission.

In self-enhanced ECL systems, the catalytic ability of the coreactant accelerators is critical for the amplification of the ECL signal. Introducing competitive ligands during the formation process of MOFs can modulate the coordination environment of the metal centers, further enhancing the catalytic ability of the coreactant accelerators towards the coreactants [72,73]. Shan's group synthesized a 2D Zn-porphyrinic Co(II)-MOF (MOF 1) with 2-methylimidazole (Melm) sitting axially on the paddle-wheel units as an enhanced ECL emitter (Fig. 11 B1) [74]. The axially coordinated Melm ligand on paddle-wheel units facilitates electron transfer between Co(II) ions and oxygen and adjusts the 2D MOF 1 for easy oxygen entry and exposure of ZnTCPP (Fig. 11 B2).

Therefore, in the ECL process,  $O_2$  is reduced to  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ , while the low-spin Co(II) ion is oxidized to Co(III) ion, which is immediately electro-reduced to Co(II). Under the above cyclic amplification process, large amounts of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  species is generated, which collides with the ZnTCPP $^{\bullet-}$  from the electrochemical reduction of ZnTCPP to produce  $1O_2$ , resulting in enhanced ECL emission (Fig. 11

#### Conclusion and future perspective

In this review, we summarize various assembly strategies based on different intermolecular forces brought by the porphyrin ring, the central metal and the peripheral substituents. (1) Natural  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking forces: Utilizing the natural  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking forces of the porphyrin ring, porphyrins can be assembled on conducting or catalytic materials to enhance electron transfer rates in the ECL process. (2) Open axial co-ordination sites: The open axial coordination sites of central metal allow porphyrins to be assembled into ordered structures, thereby attenuating substituents of porphyrins provide different dominant forces (hydrogen bond, covalent bond and coordination bond) to assemble into various ordered structures. These substituents can be modified with functional materials to achieve desirable electrochemical and optical properties.

Based on the excellent optical and electrical properties of porphyrins achieved through these assembly strategies, combined with emerging molecular engineering, nanotechnology and electrochemical analytical techniques, porphyrin-based ECL emitters are poised for applications in biomedical imaging, multi-mode detection, and environmental monitoring.

However, several key challenges must be addressed to realize practical applications. (1) The possible aggregation caused by water insolubility of porphyrin, which will restrict its application in biological systems. (2) The exploration of designing ECL luminophores with specific emission wavelengths and efficient emission efficiencies is still insufficient, which is a bottleneck for the application of porphyrin-based ECL luminophores in a variety of fields. In order to solve the above challenges, some relevant strategies are provided for reference.

(1) Improving water solubility and biocompatibility: Introducing water-soluble functional groups or complexing with biomolecules such as proteins and nucleic acids can significantly enhance their potential for use in biological systems. (2) Designing ECL emitters with specific emission wavelengths: ECL-RET is an ingenious strategy for constructing wavelength-tunable enhanced ECL emitters, which can expand its application for non-destructive imaging of living cells and tracking the dynamics of biomolecules at the single-molecule level. This strategy can not only adjust the ECL emission wavelength, but also amplify the emission of the acceptor by integrating the energy of multiple donors to single acceptor. (3) Systematic study of the amplification mechanism to design effective ECL emitters: Scanning electrochemical microscopy (SECM) and ECL microscopy (ECLM) are powerful tools to study

electron transfer kinetics and mass transport processes, which are the important factor in ECL amplification mechanism.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Yi-Xuan Li: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. Yu-Xuan Dai: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Investigation. Jérôme Chauvin: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources. Xue-Ji Zhang: Writing – review & editing, Resources, Project administration. Serge Cosnier: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. Dan Shan: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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