

THE IMAGE OF THE US ARMY IN AMERICAN MOVIES: THE SOFT POWER OF AMERICAN CINEMA

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Abstract

The formation of the army's image has acquired newfound significance in our time. Paradoxically, alongside the spread of humanist ideology, the number of violent conflicts worldwide is increasing. These stimulates the need for propaganda aimed at shaping the image of the army and enhancing the attractiveness of service. As one of the world's largest military forces, the US army has engaged in a diverse array of conflicts with over 750 military bases in approximately 80 countries (Kohli 2020). A diverse range of tools is employed to shape the image of the US army, including media, recruitment campaigns, social media, public events, etc. Among these tools, movies have their specific role. While traditionally intended for entertainment, movies have been used for over a century as a means to shape public opinion. This article delves into the main attributes of the US Army as a social institution, analyzing its four fundamental characteristics: the Militia Tradition, Mobilization Miracles, Man-Mindedness, Maritime Influence, the weapon and the enemy as distinctive attributes. Additionally, it features the seven core values of the US Army: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. The article provides a detailed analysis of how various components of movie production tools communicate the attributes and core values of the US Army and contribute to shaping its image, examining a high-viewership movie "Interceptor" (2022). The goal of the study was to find out the image of the US Army that "Interceptor" projects and to identify the verbal and visual communicative means it uses for this purpose. The content analysis made it possible to distinguish verbal and visual elements of the movie,

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encompassing human voice, *mise-en-scène*, as well as film editing techniques, to identify and highlight the messages and ideas conveyed about the attributes of the US Army.

Keywords: US Army, image of the army, attributes of the US Army, values, film industry, characters, *mise en scène*, montage techniques, enemy.

Introduction

Soft power plays an increasingly important role in the modern world, gradually replacing hard power in the context of globalization. The interconnectedness of the economies of various regions makes the use of forceful pressure on other actors in the international arena irrelevant, which is why it is so important for key players to develop and promote the soft power of their state. The most perfect embodiment of soft power at the moment is the United States of America, which, by promoting its values and ideas, has built a modern mass culture based on Americanization, which in turn is successfully broadcast through American cinema.

After the Cold War, some theorists believed that the US armed forces would evolve into “international police forces” anticipating conflicts to be resolved through international peacekeeping efforts. However, the emergence of newly independent states introduced potential conflicts, rendering global security vulnerable and the environment unpredictable and uncertain.

As one of the world’s largest military forces, the US army has engaged in a diverse array of conflicts and missions, including peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and military operations (U.S. Department Of Defence 2020). With over 750 military bases in approximately 80 countries (Kohli 2020), the sheer magnitude of the army and its activities requires communication not only with the internal audience but also with the external one.

Every year, the Reagan Institute asks about Americans’ level of trust and confidence in a variety of public institutions. In 2018, 70% expressed a great deal of trust and confidence in the military. This confidence declined by 7 points in 2019 and another 7 points in 2020, then falling 11 more points to a low of 45% in 2021. That trend appears to have plateaued, with 46% reporting a great deal of confidence in the military in 2023, consistent with the previous year (Reagan National Defence Survey 2023).

Although the US Army maintains a higher rating than the other social institutions, it is crucial to recognize that perceptions of the army can change due to various factors. Negative incidents or scandals related to the military can directly impact public trust. In this context, the US military places great emphasis on continuous efforts in image building and maintenance.

Actively engaged in global conflicts to protect national interests and assert its geopolitical stability agenda, the US military acknowledges the paramount role of positive public perceptions. These perceptions contribute to fostering a respectful attitude towards the state, the army, and the soldier, ensuring personal participation and public support, facilitating effective communication between the public and the army,

and demonstrating the power of the state. Public perception of the military plays a crucial role in recruitment, morale boost, and gaining public support for military operations. Ideas and perceptions about the army can also serve as a source of inspiration for young individuals to enlist and pursue a career within the military (Şerban 2024).

A diverse range of tools is employed to shape the image of the US army (Melkonyan 2004). The film industry stands as one of many tools shaping public perceptions of the army. Films, with their ability to create emotional connections, possess a powerful potential to influence audience perceptions. According to a study published in *Communication Research Reports*, movies have the power to influence attitudes and beliefs on various topics, including politics, social issues, and science. This stems from movies' ability to forge emotional connections with the audience, making the perception and retention of information easier for them (Kubrak 2020).

This article examines a high-viewership movie, "Interceptor" (2022), and provides a detailed analysis of how various components of movie production tools, such as characters, dialogues, mise en scène, and montage techniques, communicate the attributes of the US Army and contribute to shaping its image.

Army as a Social Institution

The army is established to safeguard the state and national interests, maintains traditional functions, such as protecting against military threats, promoting national values, and ensuring sovereignty (Dahl and Moretti 2008; Schiff 2008). As a social institution, it forms a normative structure within society with established practices, traditions, and behavioral patterns (Nickerson 2024). Scientists identify the following functions of the army: 1) External Functions: Ensures border integrity, state sovereignty, addresses universal challenges, and aids victims of aggression and allies; 2) Internal Functions: Preserves ruling social group power, prevents internal social conflicts, increases citizens' willingness to protect homeland, instills moral behavior skills, and psychological preparedness in youth (Siebold 2001; Kernic 2023).

Over time, the army's features evolve, adapting to different historical contexts. While military strength is crucial, the army remains a guarantor of statehood and sovereignty, even in times without a permanent enemy or active warfare (Hambardzumyan 2020; Edmunds 2006; Levy 2010).

The Components of the US Army Image

The reputation of the army and people's trust in the armed forces are shaped through the PR technologies used in the armed forces (Melkonyan 2015). Three main characters should be reflected in the image of the armed forces: the image of the Armed Forces in the past; the current image of the Armed Forces; the prospective image of the Armed Forces - outlining the reforms the state is making to have a more powerful and combat-ready army in the future (Mantovani and Müllhaupt 2021).

The "4 M's" of the U.S. Army are:

Militia Tradition includes citizen-soldiers who, as a rule, are not professionals but are ready to protect their communities if necessary. Additionally, the military is subject to civilian leaders, who are accountable to the people (Stentiford 2002).

Mobilization Miracles: The ability to mobilize a huge army in a short period of time requires huge resources and proper coordination. Before the World War II, a small army formed a fighting force of more than eight million people in about 4 years (Hillsdale College 2019).

Man-Minded: The well-being of soldiers has always been important in the US Army. The effectiveness of the military force is directly related to the physical and psychological condition of the personnel. US Army organizes medical services, entertainment, morale, and character-building activities for the soldiers.

Maritime Influence: The formation of the US army is based on the geographical position of the country. As long as its naval and air defense lines are intact, there is no need for a large army to protect the country's shores from foreign invasion (Davis and Shapiro 2003).

In his "The Soldier of the 21st Century", J. Hosek states that traditional wars have been replaced by terrorism, cyber and irregular wars, which are complex and unpredictable. For this reason, the US Army has begun to give importance to Cyber Soldiers for surveillance and reconnaissance in the territory of the enemy, a strategic asset of Information Warriors, which can be used to gain a competitive advantage over the enemy, Peace Operations, requiring soldiers skilled in conflict resolution, negotiation and building relationships with local communities, Rapid Response Force, conducting combat operations, peacekeeping and disaster relief, Low-Manning Vessels, operating in conditions extremely dangerous for human crews and reducing the need for large naval forces (Hosek 2003).

All of the above-mentioned characteristics form the basis of today's US army, which, considering predicted threats and the need to modernize the army, comes up with a new strategy: to have the most powerful army in the world by 2030. To meet the looming threat, the military is transforming by developing its ability to unite its influence on land, air, sea, space and cyberspace (U.S. Army 2022, 2024).

The US Army has defined seven values, which soldiers learn in Basic Combat Training and are guided by them throughout their service. These values are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage. They help to reinforce the Army's reputation as a professional, ethical and effective fighting force and to attract qualified personnel (U.S. Army 2024).

Movies as a means to shape the image of the army

Since the late 19th century, movies have evolved into a powerful blend of science, technology, and art, distinguished by their collaborative nature. Unlike many art forms, cinema involves a team comprising a director, screenwriter, cast, sound engineer, and actors, etc., and the quality of the film depends on their artistic contribution and interaction (Burch 2014; Peters 1961; Fishburne and Rine 2021).

Through dynamic visuals, temporal shifts, sound, and narrative, movies enable audiences to immerse themselves in diverse life experiences. This virtual reality

engagement triggers emotional involvement, driven by two processes: projection, where the audience attributes its feelings to characters, and identification, where the audience empathizes with characters (Turner 2000).

Movies employ special tools to convey meaning, ideas and values, including cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound, narrative, and editing (Brown 2022; Nafisah 2010; Bordwell and Thompson 2008). There are several film editing techniques, including cut - immediately following one shot with another, often to add tension and pace; jump cut - abruptly moving from one shot to another, creating disorientation or tension; match cut - combining two shots with similar element, such as color or movement; cross-cut - showing two or more different scenes back and forth, creating tension; montage - a series of shots in rapid succession conveying a large amount of information in a short period of time (Sikov 2010).

American movies typically reflect the ideals and culture of the United States, which later becomes integral to one's identity (Tal and Gordon 2016). Directors and cinematographers design numerous military, war, or conflict scenes to ensure that the audience recognizes and gets excited (Padilla and Laner 2001). The US Armed Forces has played a huge role in shaping the image of the US Army through movies: over 1100 titles on TV received Pentagon support, and from 1911 to 2017, more than 800 feature films have received financial backing from the Department of Defense (Fishburne and Rine 2021). A film might not overtly advocate for war, and it may not necessarily revolve around war, yet it can still serve a special agenda to instill habits or reactions at the unconscious level. For instance, the film "Transformers" (2007) received support from the US Army (Löfflmann 2013). Movies like "Black Hawk Down", "Top Gun", "Act of Valor", "Captain America", "Avengers: Endgame" feature renowned actors such as Tom Cruise, Ben Affleck, Brad Pitt, among others. These actors, with their image and popularity, contribute to increased viewership, expanding the movie's audience to individuals who may not usually be inclined to watch films of this genre (Martin 2023; Robb 2004). Another technique used to popularize a movie is the integration of a famous composer for the movie soundtracks, as seen with Hans Zimmer's music in "Black Hawk Down" and "The Thin Red Line", etc.

Using true stories in U.S. Army movies brings authenticity and often resonates more deeply with audiences, as demonstrated in films like "Saving Private Ryan", "American Sniper", "We Were Soldiers", among others.

Collaborating with authentic military advisers to ensure accuracy in portraying military tactics, procedures, and culture is another way. For instance, based on the non-fiction book by Jake Tapper, "The Outpost" collaborated with military advisors (Gilchrist 2020).

"Interceptor": the methodology of content analysis

One of the latest movies shaping the image of the US Army is the Australian-US co-production film "Interceptor" (2022), an action thriller directed by Matthew Reilly in his directorial debut, from a screenplay co-written by Reilly and Stuart Beattie. The movie has gained significant popularity as one of the most-watched films on Netflix (Hassall 2012).

The film has gained mixed reactions, with 44% of the 45 reviews from critics on Rotten Tomatoes being positive. They state the film will appeal to an audience fond of pointless action films, yet there is nothing new in it for them (Rotten Tomatoes 2022). Some critics lauded the film's fight scenes and pacing, while others criticized it for lacking originality and the cast's overacting. B. Lee from *The Guardian* rated the film “3 stars” and described it as “absurd yet entertaining” (Lee 2022). Despite such reviews, “*Interceptor*” grossed \$124 million in the US and Canada and \$248 million internationally during its release. As of June 2022, it held the top spot on Netflix worldwide, crossing 35 million watch-hours. The film's budget amounted to 15 million US dollars (Chande 2022).

The goal of the study was to find out the image of the US Army that “*Interceptor*” projects and to identify the verbal and visual communicative means it uses for this purpose (U.S. Department Of Defense 2020).

The content analysis made it possible to distinguish verbal and visual elements of the movie, encompassing human voice, *mise-en-scène*, as well as film editing techniques, to identify and highlight the messages and ideas conveyed about the attributes of the US Army. Each episode has been comprehensively interpreted, unveiling both their connotative and denotative meanings and messages.

The plot and characters of “*Interceptor*”

The events in the film unfold on two fronts. While the main focus centers on a military base situated in the Pacific Ocean, another military base in Alaska becomes a target for unknown militants. Simultaneously, a shocking development occurs in Russia, where 16 nuclear weapons are seized. The film's narrative revolves around the main character, JJ Collins, who, after being dismissed from her position at the Pentagon, returns to the Pacific missile defense base to avert the nuclear threat facing the country.

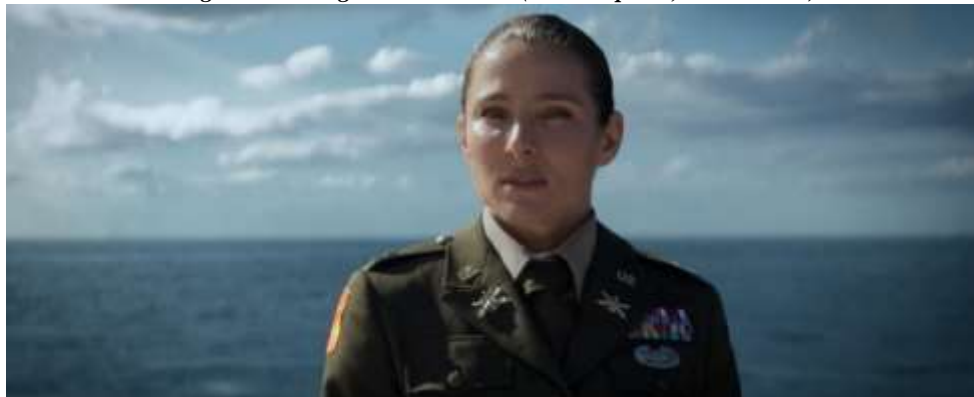
Collins' military career was curtailed when she spoke out against sexual harassment by a superior officer, leading to threats, ridicule, and expulsion from the base. A. Atanesyan identifies the problem of sexual harassment as one of the major challenges for the women in the US Armed Forces (2022). The reason behind her return was that only she could prevent the looming nuclear threat. The peace of the base is disturbed when a group of terrorists infiltrates the facility. Determined to protect her friends and prevent global catastrophe, JJ confronts armed terrorists. The film is full of intense action sequences, heroic deeds by Collins, special effects, and tense scenes, portraying the American military as heroic and innovative (*Interceptor* 2022).

Techniques employed to communicate the image of the US Army in the movie “*Interceptor*”

The film “*Interceptor*” has a total duration of 92 minutes. Every minute is used to communicate different components of the image of the US Army. Even a few shots conveying the emotional torments of the protagonist are linked to one of the image components (U.S. Army 2024).

In the movie “Interceptor,” references are made to both the four characteristics of the US Army and the seven values of the US Army ethos. At the film's outset, the protagonist is featured in her US Army uniform adorned with numerous insignias, visually communicating honor, tradition, belonging, and identity (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Protagonist JJ Collins (“Interceptor”, 3:41 minute)



Analyzing the four characteristics of the US Army in the film, it can be asserted that the mise-en-scènes communicate the Militia Tradition. For instance, the mise-en-scène of a seven-second shot at 1:03:01-1:03:08, where Collins is remotely communicating with the President and staff while executing a crucial assignment, highlights the continued civilian control over the military and reveals the fact that the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States. The same mise-en-scène also communicates loyalty, duty, courage, and selfless service. As signal specialist Shah prepares to jump into the ocean to fulfill his mission, he asserts: “Don’t think this is what heroes look like,” to which Collins responds: “Heroes look exactly like this.” This recognition by the captain reflects Shah's transformation and the desired image of a soldier. In addition to being a cyber warrior, he also acquired fighting skills. This image highlights the demands of 21st-century warfare and the preferred image of the US military’s cyber soldier, playing an important role in both traditional and remote combat.

Man-mindedness is conveyed through dialogues, such as those at 7:37 - 7:38 and 15:31 - 15:33, communicating care, concern, and respect shown to the soldiers. In the first instance, the main character asks: “Interceptors secure?”, responding to news of a skirmish at the Fort Greely military base. The US military places a strong emphasis on teamwork and the well-being of soldiers. The effectiveness of the military force is directly linked to the physical and psychological training of its personnel. Following a brief skirmish, the main character queries Corporal Shah about well-being of the soldier Beaver (15:31 -15:33). Shah discloses that Beaver is unconscious, yet assuring that everything will be fine.

The portrayal of Maritime Influence receives significant attention in the film, employing various cinematic techniques such as dialogue at 4:50, mise-en-scène at 1:02:12, montage cut at episode 48:49, and the 10-second jump cut technique at the

movie's conclusion at 1:21:31. Upon welcoming the main character, Lieutenant Colonel Clark Marshall states: "Everything's pretty much the way you left it. Navy runs the boat; Army handles the missiles" (4:50-4:54). The message emphasizes the importance of various branches of the military, highlighting that its power and influence are tied to advanced weapon systems. The dialogue stresses the significance of weapons to the strength of the US military, while alluding to the enduring maritime influence. Emphasis on the army's role in missile control, its experience in defending the country's strategic armaments, and the strength of the arsenal is emphasized. Although the military's primary operations are land-based, the film unfolds on a Pacific base, showing the historical connection to naval operations and the ability to extend influence beyond land operations. This aligns with the US Army's 2030 strategy to be the world's most powerful military by converging efforts across land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace.

The mise-en-scène lasting 1 minute and 39 seconds (1:02:10-1:03:49) also refers to the Maritime Influence (1:02:10-1:02:15). The circular room depicted in the mise-en-scène is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and conveys the modernity and functionality of the remote anti-missile base (See Figure 2). The first few seconds of the scene are noteworthy, with mercenary entering the base's self-destruct password and all the pipes opening to sink it. This sequence aptly showcases the maritime influence of the US military.

Figure 2. The circular room of the military base (Interceptor, 1:02:30 minute)



The Maritime Influence of the US Army is also communicated through the montage cut technique. In the scene spanning from 48:46 - 48:59, comprised of 7 consecutive short shots, there is a rapid succession of the fight scene, the button launching the missiles, the tracking system for the launched nuclear missile, the same scene as seen from closer and farther away, with scenes alternating between wider and closer perspectives, including a close-up shot of the "LAUNCH" button. Such a combination of combat operations and countdown serves to underscore the critical nature of the situation, creating a palpable sense of urgency and the imperative for immediate action. The US Army, equipped with powerful weaponry, stands prepared to swiftly neutralize a missile launched from Russia, safeguarding the world from a nuclear threat. Shots

during 48:48-48:51 in the observed example effectively communicate the Maritime Influence of the US Army. This fusion of shots depicting ongoing battles and missiles reinforces the perception of an imminent threat and effectively conveys the potential dire consequences of failure. The technique enhances visual impact by establishing a dynamic rhythm, capturing the audience's attention and eliciting emotional engagement. The tense situation is skillfully employed to accentuate the importance and influence of courage and selfless service, integral values of the army ethos, particularly in a crisis scenario.

This attribute of the US Army is accentuated through the jump cut editing technique, where the same scene is portrayed in “different time periods”. This specific moment occurs in “Interceptor” at 1:21:31 – 1:21:41, as the wounded protagonist emerges from the ocean after defeating Beaver (See Figure 3). This editing tool effectively conveys the physical and mental struggle of JJ, emphasizing her determination. Each missed episode appears to propel her one step further, showcasing resilience and persistence. These 10 seconds also communicate the embodiment of courage, selfless service, and honor.

Figure 3. JJ Collins comes out from the ocean after defeating Beaver (Interceptor, 1:21:30 minute)



All dialogues in the film resonate with the fundamental characteristics and values of the US Army. Noteworthy among these is the following exchange: “Welcome to SBX-1, or should I say “welcome back”. I heard that you grew up in Spain at a base your dad was posted at.” The episode unfolds as Collins lands at the SBX-1 base on a helicopter, greeted by one of the officers. The dialogue illustrates the mutual respect between officers, with Collins' experience at the Spanish base emphasizing her dedication to the army. Recognition of her background and her father's service further highlights the atmosphere of heritage, camaraderie, and loyalty.

Courage, respect, integrity and selfless service are epitomized in the dialogue at 11:28-11:34 seconds of the movie: “JJ, this is on us now, you understand? We are the only thing standing between America and Armageddon. You up for this?” “Don't worry about me, sir” – JJ answers, followed by: “Sorry. Had to ask.” This dialogue attests to the responsibility that JJ is ready to shoulder. Colonel Marshall's apparent

correction indicates implicit trust in Collins' word, underscoring the importance of integrity and tact in communication between an officer and a subordinate. This interaction forms the basis of a healthy atmosphere and teamwork in the army.

In the concluding scene 1:28:53-1:29:00, a dialogue communicating honor is presented again. With Collins already in rehab, the President of the United States treats JJ with the utmost respect and at the same time friendly during her visit: "I think a soldier of your caliber would be better put to use on my National Security staff." These words not only convey honor and respect for Collins but also demonstrate the US Army's commitment to the well-being of its soldiers and the implementation of measures to aid recovery after combat situations.

Collins bears physical markers of her bravery, including scars on her cheek and mouth, disheveled hair, and a wounded hand, all indicative of unwavering devotion to her duty. Over her white t-shirt, she wears a bulletproof vest emblazoned with the US flag. This visual representation illustrates her endurance and serves as a reminder of the sacrifices soldiers make for their country while fulfilling their duty.

In this film, the weapon assumes particular importance in shaping the image of the US Army, communicated through vocals (4:50-4:54 of the film) and *mise-en-scène* (48:54-48:55 of the film). Collins' proficiency in using various weapons is highlighted. Furthermore, the weapon communicates the importance of various tools and technologies in effectively executing US Army missions and protecting national interests.

The image of the enemy is not emphasized in the film, but the reference to Russia as a threat for US is present to add context. The presence of a specific enemy is important for a film of this type, both from the dramatic and propagandistic perspectives. From the dramatic viewpoint, the use of a named enemy helps the viewers understand the stakes of the film based on previous media consumption experience, where Russia is very commonly a threat to global peace. At the same time, if we view this technique from the propagandistic viewpoint, it helps in conditioning the viewer's opinion of the real-world entity that serves the role of the antagonist of the film.

Conclusion and discussion

The formation of the army's image has acquired newfound significance in our time. Paradoxically, alongside the spread of humanist ideology, the number of violent conflicts worldwide is increasing. These stimulates the need for propaganda aimed at shaping the image of the army and enhancing the attractiveness of service. The number of US military bases and its involvement in conflicts worldwide makes the shaping and maintenance of US Army's image crucial. The components of the US Army's image are clearly defined in four key characteristics: Militia Tradition, Man-Minded, Mobilization Miracles, and Maritime Influence, along with the seven values of the US Army Ethos.

Various tools and media are employed to shape and maintain the US Army's image. One of those is film. There are numerous films shaping the image of the US Army. The Australian-US co-production film "Interceptor" (2022) is one of the latest examples of

similar films. Summarizing the content analysis of the film, the following conclusions can be drawn. In the movie “Interceptor”, three of the 4 main characteristics of the US Army are communicated: Militia Tradition, Man-Minded, and Maritime Influence. There is no reference to Mobilization Miracles in this film. Mise-en-scènes are the main means of communicating the Military Tradition of the US Army in the movie “Interceptor”. The Man-mindedness of the US Army is primarily communicated through dialogues. The high physical fitness and mental endurance of the main character enable her to find clever solutions in challenging situations. Combat-ready soldiers are possible thanks to appropriate conditions and care shown to the soldier. The film “Interceptor” employs dialogue, mise-en-scène, cut and match cut editing techniques to communicate the Maritime Influence on the US military. The events of the film take place in an interceptor base with unclear geographical coordinates and a small operating staff. The protagonist of this film embodies the ideal soldier of the US Army. The filmmakers adhere to the seven values of the US Army ethos, utilizing various film industry toolkit techniques to portray loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Dialogues and mise-en-scènes serve as the primary means of communicating the weapon in the movie “Interceptor.” The image of the enemy (Russia) is employed as a means of adding context to the movie.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.7.056>

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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