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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pirated Weaves: Comparing Cheap Machine-Made Versus Authentic Hand-woven Akwete - Igbo Textiles and their Impacts

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Abstract

In Ndoki (Abia State, Southeast Nigeria), indigenous women manually weave Akwete, a highly reputed Igbo textile produced on women's broad vertical looms. The weavers decorate these fabrics with symbolic motifs that convey cultural narratives, historic events, proverbs, and societal perceptions. Recently, cheap, machine-made pirated imitations have proliferated across physical and online markets. While this piracy threatens traditional livelihoods, it has simultaneously increased mass awareness of Akwete aesthetics. This qualitative study presents a comparative analysis of authentic hand-woven Akwete and its machine-made counterfeits, evaluating their distinct physical characteristics and socio-economic impacts. Utilizing field observations and focus group discussions, the research examines differences in craftsmanship, value perception, and consumer demand. The findings reveal that while fashion designers increasingly adopt cheaper counterfeits, this market shift severely undermines the cultural heritage and economic survival of indigenous weavers. Conclusively, this article supports the need for protective intellectual property measures and sustainable cultural preservation policies to support authentic Akwete weaving communities.

Keywords: Akwete Textile, Igbo Material Culture, Textile Piracy, Traditional Craftsmanship, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Socio-Economic Impact.

1. Introduction

The Akwete textile tradition, originating from the Akwete-Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria, represents an expression of indigenous textile art, heritage, and cultural identity that has endured for generations. Renowned for their intricate, numerous patterns, vibrant colours, and meticulous hand weaving techniques, hand woven Akwete fabrics have historically held significant economic and symbolic value within both local and broader regional and international contexts (Uche, 2017). These textiles are not only functional items of clothing but also serve as status symbols, ceremonial attire, and treasured family heirlooms, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural narratives and social structures of the Igbo people. The process of creating Akwete cloth is labour-intensive (a pair could take up to two to three weeks to weave) (Chudi-Duru, 2025), requiring specialized knowledge passed down through lineages, and is often performed on traditional womens' vertical looms by only females using locally sourced materials. A teenage weaver, by name- Queen Okere, who was found weaving at the Akwete Women's Co-operative Weaving Society building during this research, is placed in figure 1. However, in recent decades, the proliferation of cheap, machine-made imitations, often referred to as pirated weaves, has posed a considerable threat to the survival of traditional weaving practices and the livelihoods of Akwete weavers (Okafor & Nwankwo, 2020). This challenge has become more pronounced with increasing globalization and shifts in consumer preferences, making it harder for authentic weavers to compete in an evolving market.

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Figure 1. *A teenage weaver, Queen Okere, working at the Akwete Women's Co-operative Weaving Society building. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

Machine-made replicas, mass-produced and marketed at lower prices, have flooded both local and international markets in recent years, appealing to cost-conscious consumers who may not fully appreciate the artistry and heritage embedded in genuine Akwete textiles (Eze & Opara, 2019). This influx of imitations has not only led to significant economic challenges for traditional weavers, including reduced demand, lower incomes, and the risk of losing generational skills, but has also raised urgent concerns regarding the preservation of cultural heritage, authenticity, and the unique skills associated with Akwete weaving (Chudi-Duru (2025) & Nwachukwu (2018)). Many weavers have reported a decline in apprenticeship interest among younger generations, further threatening the continuity of this indigenous art. Additionally, the loss of market share to mass-produced alternatives has resulted in dwindling community support and diminished pride in local artistry. The resulting tension between innovation, accessibility, and cultural preservation underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex socio-economic dynamics at play, as well as the potential consequences for identity and heritage within the wider Nigerian society. An Akwete fabric still in the weaving process is placed on figure 2.

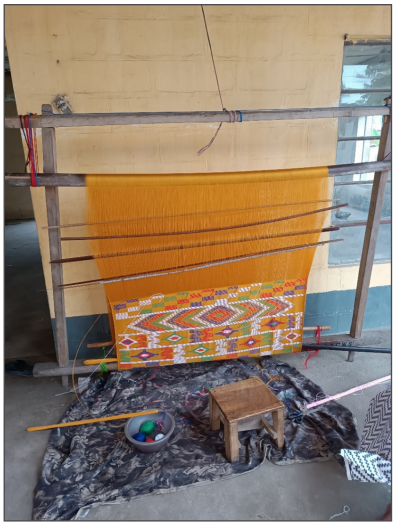


Figure 2. *An authentic Akwete textile on a vertical loom during production at the Akwete Women's Co-operative Weaving Society building. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

This study provides a comparative analysis of cheap machine-made Akwete-Igbo woven textiles and authentic hand woven fabrics, with a particular focus on their distinguishing features, market trajectories, and the implications for Akwete weavers. Through this analysis, the research illuminates the broader impact of textile piracy on indigenous weavers, fosters appreciation for traditional weaving, and suggests pathways for sustaining weavers' livelihoods in the face of modern manufacturing challenges. This research objective is to compare the cheap machine-made Akwete-Igbo woven textiles and the authentic hand-woven fabrics and find out their impacts on Akwete weavers, and the research question is: In what ways

can the cheap machine- made Akwete- Igbo woven Textiles and the authentic hand- woven fabrics be analysed to find out their impacts on Akwete weavers? Statement of the problem The increased prevalence of cheap machine-made Akwete-Igbo woven textiles, often produced and distributed without regard for traditional standards, poses significant challenges to the survival of authentic hand woven Akwete fabrics. First, the market for traditional weavers is shrinking as consumers opt for less expensive machine-made alternatives, directly threatening the economic stability and livelihood of the weavers. Second, the influx of pirated weaves erodes the perceived value and cultural significance of genuine Akwete cloth, leading to a loss of appreciation for the skill, time, and heritage embedded in traditional weaving practices. Third, the unregulated production and sale of imitations contribute to the dilution of cultural identity and undermine efforts to preserve indigenous craftsmanship. Finally, there is a lack of effective policy interventions and support mechanisms to protect Akwete weavers from unfair competition and to sustain the authenticity of this cultural heritage.

Theoretical frame work Cultural Materialism, propounded by Marvin Harris (1979). It explores how material conditions, such as economic and technological factors, shape cultural practices and beliefs. This theory is relevant for understanding how the proliferation of machine-made textiles affects traditional weaving, cultural identity, and the survival of indigenous crafts. The Theory of Cultural Appropriation was propounded by James O. Young (2008). It examines how elements of a minority culture are adopted by a dominant culture, often without permission or proper acknowledgment. This theory helps analyze the ethical and social implications of mass-producing Akwete designs without respecting the original creators. Innovation Diffusion Theory was propounded by Everett Rogers (1962). Rogers' theory of innovation diffusion explains how new ideas and technologies spread through societies. It is useful for analyzing how machine-made textile technologies are adopted, their appeal to consumers, and their disruptive impact on traditional weaving communities. Authenticity Theory, propounded by Charles Taylor (1991), was used to emphasize the importance of genuine cultural expression. This theory was used to examine how the market for fake or pirated Akwete cloth threatens the authenticity and perceived value of hand-woven originals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Akwete-Igbo Hand-Woven Fabrics

According to Afigbo (1981), the Igbo people live in the South-eastern part of Nigeria in West Africa. Its people are among the most numerous ethnic nationalities in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a teeming population. Anni (2015) mentions that archaeological evidences have proven that this race practiced an indigenous weaving known as Akwete. Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2015) and Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012) report that Akwete cloth is made by the females of Ukwa East Local Government Area in Abia State, Nigeria. They further mentioned that the towns where these traditional industries are located make up the following towns and villages – Ndoki of Abia State, which shares common boundaries with Ndoki, Ijo and Ogoni of Rivers State as a cluster of weaving communities. Towns in Asa, Abia state where this weaving is still practiced till date are Umunteke, Ohuchu, Mkporobo, Umuebulungwa and Owo. Ndoki (in Abia State), prominent towns where the weaving tradition is still practiced to date are Akwete, Ohanso, Obunku, Ohambele, Obeaku and Obehie. Ndoki in Rivers State, where this weaving tradition is still practiced, has many towns, among which Umuagbai is most prominent. Ekeke in Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2013) named cloth weaving in Umuagbai – Ndoki– Rivers State "Akuruaku," while in Ndoki – Abia State it is called "Akwete," meaning something woven. It is also called ukpuru in the Akwete dialect. Afigbo in Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2013) point out that the weaving is called Akwete because the Akwete people, among other towns in Ukwa Local Government Area, take weaving as their major occupation, while others combined weaving with farming. It is a common heritage of the clan. They further explained that Akwete was brought into the limelight by scholars through their contact with the colonial masters, and it is a traditional technology strongly believed to be an indigenous practice known to the people of Igboland. This fact was buttressed by the emphasis laid on the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological discovery in 1838 by Isaiah Anozie, who stumbled upon colourful regalia and other artifacts during the digging of a water cistern in his compound. They also mentioned that this discovery led the Federal Department of Antiquities (Federal Commission for Museums and Monuments) to authorize an investigation by inviting Thurston Shaw in 1964-65. In 1970 and 1977, Shaw's findings were published and subjected to radiocarbon dating. Colourful materials (regalia) were also discovered and dated to the 9th Century AD. Aronson (1980) also recorded that archaeological remains of woven bark fragments from the 9th Century A.D. archaeological site at Igbo Ukwu has provided an evidence of the earliest known weaving in Nigeria, although the specific nature and use of these textiles is not known.

These discoveries of textiles at Igbo Ukwu was correlated with Akwete indigenous weaving materials. According to Lambs and Holmes (1980), other parts of Igboland that wove are the Nsukka women, Abakaliki women in Ebonyi State, Umuagbai women in Rivers State, and Aniocha women (they weave a cloth named akwaocha) in Delta State, among others. The weavers which consists of only women till date wove with their hands on womens vertical or broad loom. Negri (1976), in Aniakor (2002) in Ofomata (2002), views the prestigious Igbo cloth known as Akwete cloth as that which utilizes rayon or other synthetic threads to make the floated patterns found on the woven cloth. And these patterns consist of symbolic motifs which confer status and prestige to the woven cloth. The woven symbolic motifs are arranged on the woven cloth to form some patterns in the designs of the woven fabrics by utilizing the elements and principles of design. Chudi-Duru (2017) reports that most females in Akwete know how to weave, and the younger ones are taught to weave as soon as they can operate the narrow wall loom. The design motifs are woven onto the fabric with the aid of the women's vertical loom (Chukueggu, 2000). They can be used to communicate evocative messages that represent parts of their life or those around them. They have unique looks and meanings. All the motifs incorporated in Akwete weaving originated from somewhere. Some of the weavers claim that they get some of their designs in dreams; some of them were created by the weavers themselves, according to Nneoma Okere, an Akwete weaver who was met by the researcher in 2026. Some of the weavers are motivated by getting inspiration from the surroundings, Igbo beliefs, traditions, folklore, and the Igbo worldview.

2.2 Pirated Indigenous African Fabrics and their Copies

Indigenous African textiles are widely regarded for their intricate designs, vibrant colours, and deep-rooted cultural symbolism. Fabrics such as Ghana's Kente, Nigeria's Akwete, and Mali's Bogolanfini (mud cloth) have long served as markers of identity, status, and artistic ingenuity within their respective communities (Arthur, 2021). However, the rapid growth of global textile markets and advances in manufacturing technologies have led to the widespread production of pirated copies of these unique fabrics. These machine-made imitations, often produced cheaply in foreign factories, are increasingly displacing authentic hand-woven or handmade textiles both within Africa and internationally (Eze & Opara, 2019). The proliferation of pirated indigenous fabrics poses significant challenges to local producers and their communities. First, it results in economic displacement, as mass-produced imitations outcompete original hand woven fabrics on price and availability, undermining the livelihoods of traditional weavers (Nwachukwu, 2018). Secondly, the cultural value and authenticity of these textiles are threatened as consumers become less able to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit products. This erodes the intangible heritage embedded within traditional weaving practices and diminishes appreciation for the skills, time, and cultural narratives inherent in each handmade piece (Young, 2008). Furthermore, the unregulated nature of textile piracy facilitates cultural appropriation, where designs are used without proper acknowledgment or compensation to the originating communities (Young, 2008). This dynamic not only disrupts local economies but also contributes to the dilution of cultural identities. Addressing these challenges requires both policy interventions and increased consumer awareness to protect indigenous textile traditions from further erosion.

2.3 Pirated Faux Fabrics: Implications and Challenges

The global textile industry has witnessed a surge in the production and circulation of pirated faux fabrics-counterfeit versions of branded or culturally significant textiles manufactured without authorization. These fabrics are typically mass-produced using inexpensive materials and digital printing technologies, allowing counterfeiters to replicate intricate designs and patterns at a fraction of the cost of genuine articles (Bick, Halse, & Ekenga, 2018). Some of these counterfeit fabrics are also mass-produced using mechanized looms. The proliferation of pirated faux fabrics not only threatens the economic interests of original designers and weavers but also undermines the cultural and symbolic value associated with original textiles (Young, 2008). One of the primary challenges posed by pirated faux fabrics is their impact on the market for authentic products. By offering visually similar alternatives at lower prices, counterfeit textiles divert consumer demand away from legitimate producers, resulting in revenue losses and diminished brand reputation (D'Arpizio, Levato, Prete, Del Fabbro, & de Montgolfier, 2019). For cultures with rich textile traditions, such as those found across Africa and Asia, the spread of faux fabrics also poses a threat to the preservation of traditional knowledge and artisanal skills, as the economic viability of handcrafting diminishes (Eze & Opara, 2019). Moreover, pirated faux fabrics can contribute to ethical

and legal dilemmas, including intellectual property violations and the perpetuation of exploitative labour practices in unregulated manufacturing hubs (Bick et al., 2018). Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach, including stronger enforcement of intellectual property rights, consumer education, and support for sustainable and transparent supply chains. Fake Akwete Machine-Made Fabrics in Contemporary Fashion. The rise of machine-made Akwete fabrics has significantly influenced contemporary fashion, both within Nigeria and internationally. These imitation textiles, produced using industrial weaving technologies, mimic the distinctive patterns and motifs of original Akwete cloth but are made at a fraction of the cost and time. As a result, fake Akwete fabrics have become widely accessible, allowing designers and retailers to incorporate "Akwete-inspired" aesthetics into mass-market apparel and accessories (Okeke, 2019). While the increased availability of machine-made Akwete has contributed to the visibility of Igbo textile heritage, it has also led to concerns about cultural dilution and authenticity. In many contemporary fashion collections, these fabrics are used without acknowledgment of their origins, raising issues of cultural appropriation and intellectual property rights (Nwafor & Oguamanam, 2021). Moreover, the uniformity and synthetic feel of machine-woven imitations lack the tactile richness and artisanal value of authentic hand-woven Akwete, reducing the cultural and economic significance of the craft (Eze, 2022). The prevalence of fake Akwete in fashion reflects broader trends in the commodification and global circulation of indigenous designs, where traditional symbols are often detached from their original cultural contexts for commercial purposes (Young, 2008). This dynamic not only threatens the livelihood of traditional weavers but also undermines the integrity and authenticity of Akwete as a marker of Igbo identity. An example of machine-made akwete fabric design is placed on the figure 3.



Figure 3. *a style made with machine-made Akwete fabric by Ugo Akwete dress black.*

source: *https://zephansandco.com/item/ugo-akwete-dress-black/?srsltid=AfmBOoqr0tFQsopxnXh5g0JFSAvcxuaIWUxwpkktFiJ2SNtOnYCT2e&__cf_chl_rt_tk=jt_B1bc3EHhsWqGilNvE.PLN1ALJp6a87MCzKyvUO8g-1785502959-1.0.1.1-ECxCuytVSXYdr8W9MoWpi8XYHkR9p1.1ZDSQCTuw1M*

3. Methodology

This is a survey and it utilized mixed methods approach in data collection. A dichotomous questionnaire and focus group discussions were used to collect some data in this research. Descriptive statistics, bar charts, and percentages were used to present the scores. It was carried out in Akwete town. A total of thirty weavers were interviewed, after which they responded to the questionnaire. They were all women and between the ages of 30-65. They were found knowledgeable enough to respond to the questionnaire. All thirty questionnaires were returned, and the responses are presented in bar charts and percentages. Research Question

In what ways can the cheap machine-made Akwete- Igbo woven Textiles and the authentic hand- woven fabrics be compared, and what are their impacts on Akwete weavers?

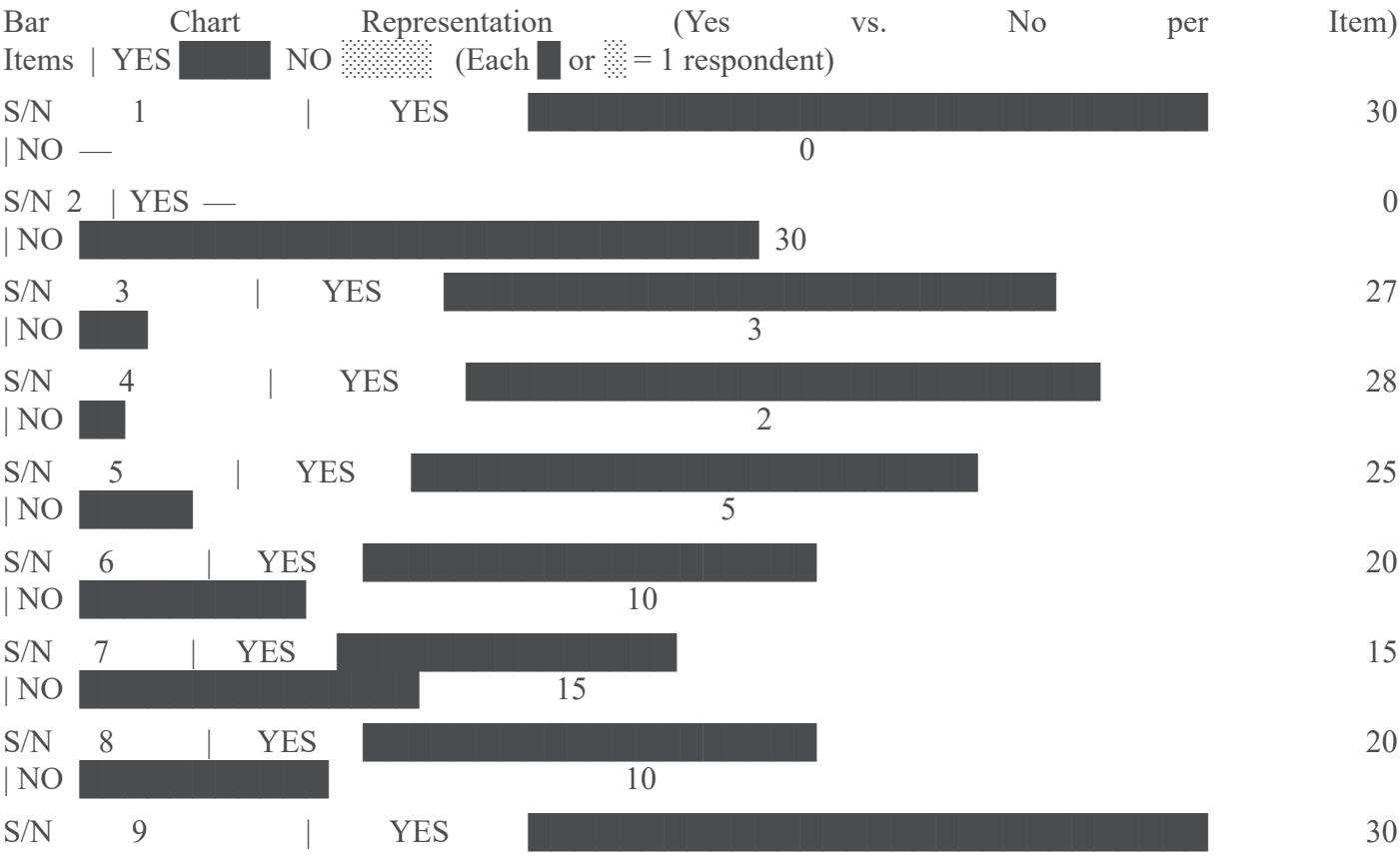
Table 1. *Respondents: 30 Weavers of Akwete hand woven fabrics*

S/N	ITEMS	Yes Count (%)	No Count (%)	Total Count (100%)
1	All authentic Akwete hand woven fabrics are made with hand and in Akwete town	30 100%	0	30 100%
2	Akwete woven wrappers should be made with the aid of automated machines	0	30 100%	30 100%

3	The hand-made are more expensive than the machine-made	27 90%	3 10%	30 100%
4	The machine made Akwete are not the same with the original hand made	28 93%	2 7%	30 100%
5	The machine made pose a threat to the original ones made in Akwete town	25 83%	5 17%	30 100%
6	The fake Akwete woven hand woven fabrics should not be utilized in contemporary fashion	20 67%	10 33%	30 100%
7	The machine made also depict Igbo heritage based on the woven motifs	15 50%	15 50%	30 100%
8	It is impossible for the machine made to replace the original ones	20 67%	10 33%	30 100%
9	The machine made could not be found in Akwete town for now	30 100%	0	30 100%
10	The machine made do not look more attractive than the original	24 80%	6 20%	30 100%
11	Most designs have been copied and produced by machines	10 33%	20 67%	30 100%
12	There are physical differences among the two	25 87%	5 17%	30 100%
13	The machine made could be compared to the hand-made	28 93%	2 7%	30 100%
14	I prefer the hand-made to the machine-made	30 100%	0	30 100%
15	The patronage has been affected through the introduction of machine-made Akwete fabrics.	26 87%	4 13%	30 100%

Source: *Chudi-Duru, 2026*

Frequency Analysis: Original Akwete Hand-Woven Design vs. Machine-Woven Fabrics



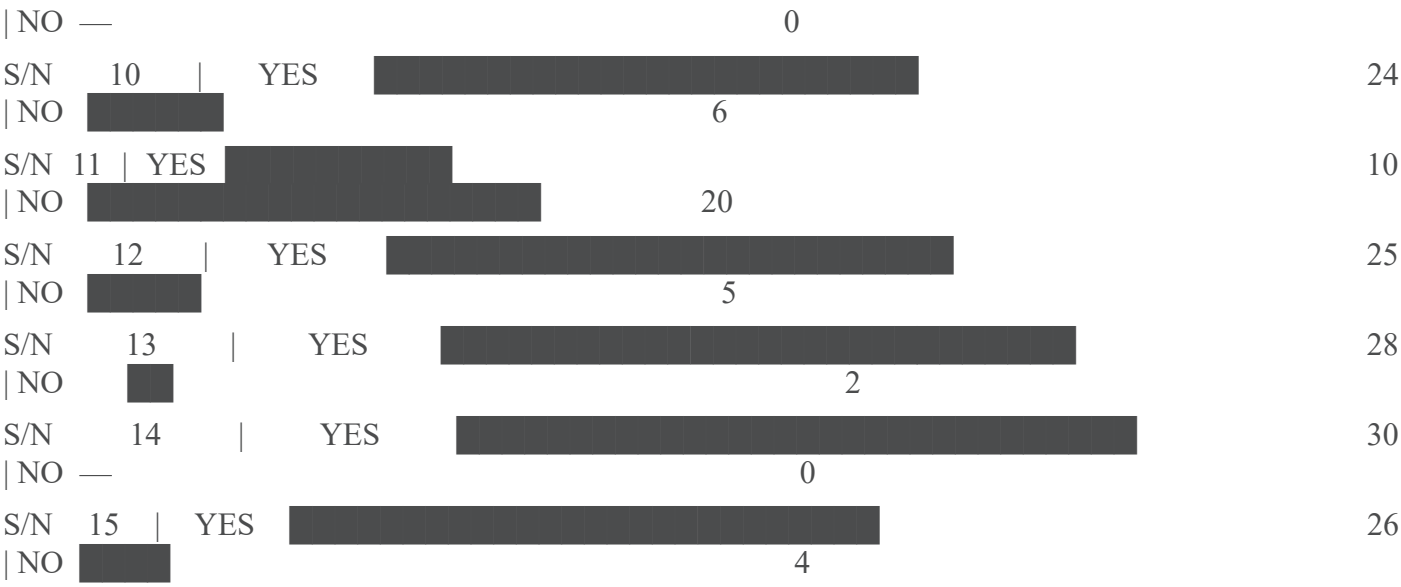


Table 1 presents the respondents' ideology or portrayal of the weavers' reactions to original Akwete hand-woven design versus the machine-woven fabrics called Akwete. From the table, eleven items from the questionnaire were accepted while two other items were rejected. From the percentages recorded on the items that were accepted, they show that: All Akwete hand woven fabrics are made with hand and in Akwete town with a 100%YES, Akwete woven wrappers are made with the aid of automated machines with a 100%NO, The hand-made are more expensive than the machine-made with a 90%YES, the machine made Akwete are not the same with the original hand made with a 93%YES, while the machine made Akwete pose a threat to the original ones made in Akwete town recorded a 93% YES, the fake Akwete woven hand woven fabrics should not be utilized in contemporary fashion scored 67% YES, the machine made also depict Igbo heritage based on the woven motifs had a score of 50 % YES and 50% NO, it is impossible for the machine made to replace the original ones had a score of 67% YES, the machine made are not found in Akwete town with a score of 100% YES, the machine made look more attractive than the original ones scored 84% YES, while they disagreed that most designs have been copied and produced by machines with a score of 67%NO, there physical differences among the two scored 87% YES, they also disagreed that machine- made cannot be compared to the hand-made with a score of 93%, they agreed that they prefer the hand-made to the machine-made with a score of 100% YES, and agreed that the patronage has been affected through the introduction of machine-made Akwete fabrics, this scored 87%YES. Summary of Findings/Observation/Detail: Unanimous YES responses: Items 1, 9, 14 — 30/30 (100%). Unanimous NO responses: Item 2 — 30/30 (100%). Highest disagreement (split): Item 7 — 50% Yes / 50% No. Strong majority YES (>80%): Items 3, 4, 5, 13, 15. Majority NO: Item 11 — 20 respondents (66.7%). Based on the value of the percentages recorded in Table 1, it can be inferred that some fake woven fabrics decorated with Akwete symbolic motifs have been pushed to the market, and people are patronizing them. The 30 Akwete weavers overwhelmingly affirm the authenticity, superiority, and irreplaceability of hand-woven Akwete fabrics. They unanimously reject machine production and prefer the hand-made, while acknowledging that machine-made fabrics pose a significant threat to the woven fabric patronage and its cultural heritage.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Machine-Made and Hand-woven Akwete

This study found out that authentic Akwete hand-woven fabrics offer numerous designs, and newer design motifs keep on being produced by the women. The fakes are usually the copies of the original ones. They depend on the original designs as inspiration to produce the fakes. The originals are made with lurex yarns and what they call cone (polyester yarns). They are also heavier in weight than the fakes. This study found out that in the production processes, machine-made Akwete textiles and their original hand woven counterparts present stark contrasts in terms of production, quality, cultural significance, and economic impact. Hand woven Akwete fabrics are crafted by skilled weavers using traditional looms and techniques passed down through female generations. Each piece reflects intricate patterns, unique colour combinations, and a high degree of craftsmanship, making them not only

functional but also carriers of Igbo cultural heritage. The process is labour-intensive, requiring significant time, effort, and expertise, which is reflected in the fabric's superior durability and distinctiveness. Incontrast,machine-madeAkwetetextilesareproduced rapidly in factories using automated processes, often relying on synthetic materials and standardized patterns. These imitations lack the nuanced designs and tactile qualities of authentic hand-woven fabrics. While machine-made textiles are more affordable and widely available, they sacrifice the individuality and cultural depth inherent in hand-woven pieces. Economically, the widespread availability of cheaper machine-made Akwete has undermined the market for traditional weavers, threatening their livelihoods and reducing incentives for younger generations to learn the weaving techniques. Culturally, the proliferation of machine-made fabrics erodes the prestige and symbolic value of authentic Akwete, contributing to the loss of intangible heritage and weakening community identity. Hand woven are more expensive due to craftsmanship and limited availability. They are not readily available in the open markets. Thus, while machine-made Akwete offers accessibility and affordability, it does so at the cost of authenticity, quality, and cultural preservation. Hand woven fabrics support local weavers and sustain traditional livelihoods; it has higher market value. Machine-made Akwete undermines the market for authentic weavers and threatens weavers' economic stability. Hand-woven Akwete used natural fibers at the inception, like cotton, and synthetic yarns to produce unique, durable, and high-quality fabrics with intricate patterns, while machine-made often uses synthetic materials and produces standardized, less durable, and lower-quality textiles. Hand woven fabrics are heavier depending on the cloth count. The selvedges are different from each other. The machine made selvedge appears smoother than the hand made. Pirated Akwete fabrics

4.2 Pirated Akwete Fabrics



Figure 4. *A machine-woven imitation textile featuring counterfeited Akwete symbolic motifs. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*



Figure 5. *A machine-woven imitation textile featuring counterfeited Akwete symbolic motifs. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

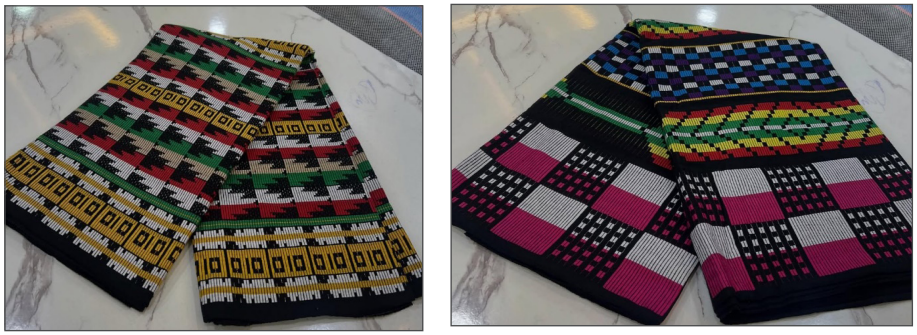


Figure 6. *A machine-woven imitation textile featuring counterfeited Akwete symbolic motifs. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*



Figure 7. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

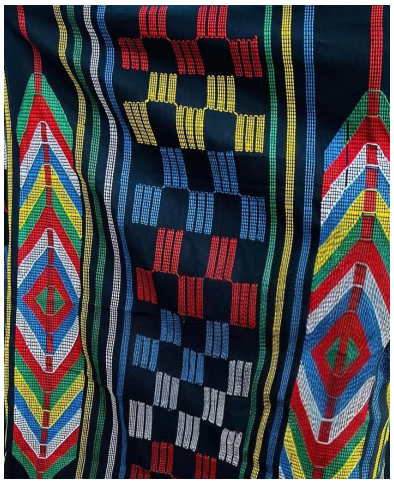


Figure 8. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*



Figure 9. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*



Figure 10. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

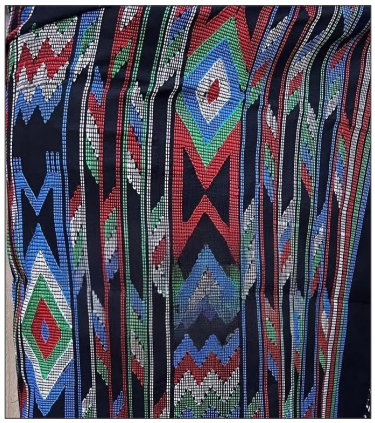


Figure 11. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

In this study, Fake (Machine-Woven) Akwete Fabrics and Original (Hand-Woven) Akwete Fabrics were compared physically, and their characteristics were found and recorded.

4.3 Physical Characteristics: Fake (Machine-Woven) Akwete Fabrics

- *Uniformity:* Machine-woven Akwete fabrics were found to be extremely uniform in weave and pattern, they lacked the slight irregularities that hand-weaving produces.
- *Tight weaves:* the weaves are tighter than the hand-made Akwete
- *Texture:* The surface are smoother to touch and stiffer due to the use of synthetic fibres and industrial finishing.
- *Design Precision:* Patterns looked perfect but often lack the some details and subtlety of hand-woven motifs.
- *Fibres Used:* Frequently made with cheaper synthetic or blended fibres, rather than the high-quality cone (cotton/rayon) or synthetic silk used in authentic Akwete.
- *Selvedge and Edges:* Machine-made versions usually have clearly cut, sometimes over-locked edges, whereas hand-woven selvedges are often more finished as part of the weaving process.
- *Colour:* Colours may look unnaturally bright due to chemical dyes.
- *Weight and Drape:* Machine-woven Akwete feel lighter and stiffer than the authentic hand woven Akwete fabrics.
- *Repetition:* Designs are often repeated exactly across the fabric, like the variations seen in hand-woven pieces. There are differences between the front and the back of the fabric.
- *Copied versions:* some of the machine made are all copied versions of the original while some are just geometrical shapes arranged to look like Akwete hand-woven fabrics.

4.4 Physical Characteristics: Original (Hand-Woven) Akwete Fabrics

- *Irregularities:* there are subtle irregularities in the weave or pattern of the authentic hand-woven Akwete fabrics, reflecting the weaver's hand and creativity.
- *Texture:* they have a softer, more luxurious feel, sometimes with a slight unevenness to the touch due to hand manipulation of fibres.
- *Design Detail:* they possess intricate, detailed, geometric and culturally significant motifs carefully woven into the fabric, often with unique elements that reflect the weaver's individual style.
- *Fibres Used:* they are made from high-quality synthetic yarns called cone and silk by the weavers, sometimes featuring lurex (shiny) yarns and hand-spun yarns in the earlier woven pieces.
- *Selvedge and Edges:* these are finished by hand as part of the weaving, resulting in neat, uneven, durable scalloped selvedges and tassels.
- *Weight and Drape:* they are heavier than the factory made, with a substantial body.
- *Personal Touch:* in the earlier times the woven motifs were often signed or marked by the weaver, and motifs may have cultural or personal significance.
- *Cut and joint threads:* In every original Akwete, one will find where the threads were cut or joined neatly in the added weft or design motif woven on the fabric.
- *Varied sizes:* The original Akwete cloth comes in two pairs of 2 yards per pair, although sometimes one might slightly vary from the other pair.
- *Hand-knotted fringes:* In original Akwete cloth,

the fringes are usually knotted or hand-sewn to avoid ripping, and this adds an extra cost.

- *Reversible added weft designs:* some original Akwete woven designs could be worn with either side facing out but this is not obtainable in the factory made Akwete fabrics. None is reversible in the factory- made ones.

The added weft designs looks bolder and embossed than the machine made added designs which are as flat as the surface. These physical distinctions, as discovered by this study, make it possible to differentiate authentic hand-woven Akwete from mass-produced machine-made imitations.

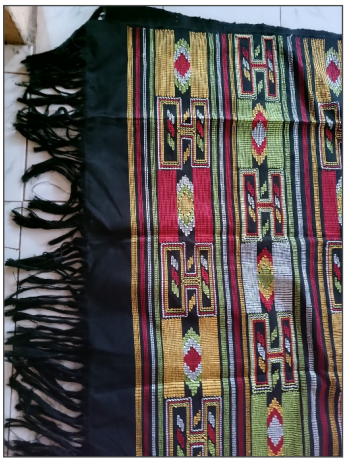


Figure 12. *An authentic, hand-woven Akwete textile. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*



Figure 13. *a. A machine woven fabric called Akwete showcasing the front of the fabric. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026. b: A machine woven fabric called Akwete showcasing the back of the fabric. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

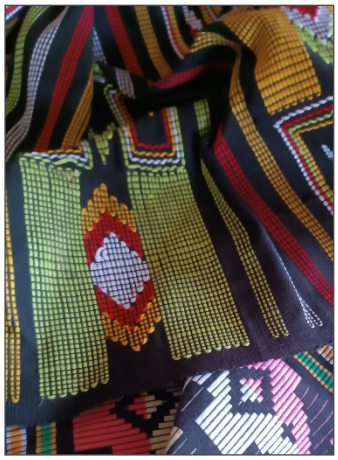


Figure 14. *An authentic hand-woven Akwete textile being laid side by side with a machine woven fabric called Akwete showcasing the front of the fabrics. Photograph by Chudi-Duru, 2026.*

4.5 Analysis

During this study, focus group discussions were conducted with some of the weavers in the Akwete weaving centre to find out the impact of machine-made imitations of Akwete hand-woven fabrics on them. The impacts are as follows:

• *Economic Displacement and Loss of Income*

Akwete weaving has always been essential to the local economy, and the weavers, who are only women, depend on this profession for their main income, which gives them both economic and social power. Most of them that farm also weave after they must

have come back from their farms. From the discussion, the researcher found out that the weavers use the income from weaving to train their children and also help their communities in various ways. Therefore, the flooding of the market with cheap machine-made imitations directly threatens this livelihood. They revealed that Akwete weaving is challenged by mass-produced cheaper fabrics, thereby reducing demand for hand-woven cloth. Since it can take an individual weaver up to three days to finish weaving a cloth depending on size and complexity of technique and pattern, authentic pieces cannot compete on price with machine-produced counterfeits, leading to significant income loss for weavers as they also disclosed that the faux weaves are sold as cheap as 25 to 40 thousand Naira only while the authentic ones are from 90 thousand Naira upwards depending on the complexity of the designs.

• *Erosion of Cultural Identity and Symbolic Value*

Akwete traditional hand weaving, exclusively practised by Igbo women in Akwete, Abia State, Nigeria, is a vital art form that embodies Igbo cultural identity. This female-led art is rooted in indigenous heritage and history. The intricately woven cloths are decorated with symbolic motifs that express the Igbo worldview, capturing social events, family structures, women's experiences, household items, beliefs, and historical narratives. They also mentioned that Machine-made imitations strip away this deep cultural meaning, reducing a revered art to a commodity, and risk devaluing the cloth's role as a marker of identity, status, and ceremony.

• *Violation of Intellectual Property and Unwritten Copyright*

The weavers in Akwete claim to know over a hundred different motifs, and more than three or four designs are usually used simultaneously on one piece of cloth. Traditionally, the creator of a new motif is granted an unwritten copyright. Machine-made pirated weaves that replicate these symbolic motifs violate this held community intellectual property system. The women of Akwete set up a weaving society that later transitioned into a collective of female weavers focused on all the affairs concerning weaving, fabric quality as well as issues of copyright, indicating that the community has long been aware of and resistant to copying yet informal protections are no match for industrial-scale reproduction.

• *Threat to Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer.*

Traditionally, the women of the family would pass down weaving techniques to their daughters and other female members of the family. This knowledge is usually kept from those outside the community. It was commonplace for young girls to begin learning how to weave as early as six or seven years old, and attain mastery of the craft by puberty. These girls would continue weaving and pass down these same techniques to their daughters. If cheap machine-made imitations collapse the market and reduce economic incentives, younger generations may abandon the weaving profession entirely, breaking this chain of transmission and threatening the survival of the tradition.

• *Discouragement of Innovation*

When pirated versions flood the market, weavers lose the motivation and financial reward to innovate, since their new designs can be quickly copied and mass-produced at a fraction of the cost. The women revealed that they are no longer willing to share the pictures of their woven products because they feel that their design are always copied by others. Modern Akwete weaving is struggling to survive, and some women still practice it to this day because it is their only livelihood. However, due to its technical demands and complexity, the women are of the view that copying their designs through the aid of machine weaving and selling them very, very cheap discourage them from showcasing innovative designs.

• *Decline in Social and Ceremonial Prestige*

Among the Akwete people, the cloth is used to signify wealth or power. For example, Akwete cloth can be used as a wedding dowry, as well as decorations for royal burial sites. When machine-made imitations become indistinguishable to the untrained eye, the prestige associated with authentic Akwete cloth diminishes, undermining its ceremonial and social significance in Igbo culture.

• *Market Confusion and Consumer Deception*

Because the technique employed in Akwete weaving requires great skill and precision, and each piece is a labour of love, woven with deep cultural significance, consumers who unknowingly purchase machine-made counterfeits are being deceived. This creates market confusion that further disadvantages authentic weavers who cannot lower their prices to match factory production.

• Potential Responses and Pathways Forward Despite these threats, there are ongoing efforts to protect the weaving tradition. Groups and government programs now support the profession through looking for ways to ensure it remains strong. An example is

the First lady of Abia state-Mrs. Priscilla Otti, who visited the weaving centre on February 27, 2026, and used the platform to reiterate the administration's commitment, led by Governor Alex Chioma Otti, to boost local indigenous industries. She pledged robust support to promote these handmade, traditional textiles to global markets through the National Development of Indigenous Textile Artisans project, which supports artisans with essential resources and equips them with skills to produce more productively and profitably. Also, Nigeria's First Lady, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, visited the historic Akwete Weaving Cooperative Village in Ukwa East Local Government Area of Abia State on Tuesday, July 21, 2026. Hosted by Governor Alex Otti and his wife, Priscilla, she announced a ₦2 billion financial intervention to revive the traditional textile industry, empower local artisans, and build a modern hub. Additionally, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Akwete weaving as part of the larger movement towards promoting indigenous crafts and preserving Nigeria's cultural heritage. The Nigerian government, through various initiatives, is supporting traditional artisans and weavers, encouraging them to adopt sustainable and eco-friendly practices. These efforts aim to elevate the status of Akwete cloth on the global stage, positioning it as a luxury textile with deep cultural roots. The proliferation of cheap, machine-made imitations of Akwete cloth has profound implications for the traditional weaving, cultural identity, and economic livelihood of Igbo weaving communities. Analyzing this phenomenon through multiple theoretical lenses reveals complex dynamics at play, for instance: Cultural Materialism (Marvin Harris, 1979) provides a foundational perspective by examining how material conditions such as technological advancements and economic pressures directly influence cultural practices. The emergence of machine-made Akwete textiles is largely a response to market demand for affordable, easily accessible fabrics. These mass-produced alternatives, enabled by modern textile technology, reduce production costs and make Akwete-style cloth widely available. However, this material shift undermines the traditional hand-weaving process, threatening the survival of indigenous craftsmanship and eroding the economic base of local weavers, who cannot compete with the low prices of pirated or factory-made cloth. Cultural Appropriation Theory (James O. Young, 2008) highlights the ethical and social consequences of dominant groups adopting elements of minority cultures without proper acknowledgment. In the case of Akwete, manufacturers often replicate sacred or culturally significant motifs without consulting or compensating the original creators. This commodification strips the designs of their cultural meaning and disrespects the intellectual property rights of the Igbo weaving community. The widespread distribution of pirated weaves thus perpetuates power imbalances, marginalizes indigenous voices, and leads to feelings of resentment and loss among traditional weavers. Innovation Diffusion Theory (Everett Rogers, 1962) offers insight into how machine-made textile technologies spread and disrupt established cultural practices. Consumers are drawn to the convenience, lower cost, and variety offered by machine-made Akwete cloth, accelerating its adoption and further displacing hand-woven originals. This rapid diffusion of innovation creates a feedback loop: as more consumers choose cheap imitations, demand for authentic cloth declines, incentivizing further production of counterfeits. The result is a shrinking market for traditional weavers, who may be forced to abandon their vocation or look for other alternatives, potentially diluting the artisanal value of their work. Authenticity Theory (Charles Taylor, 1991) deepens the analysis by focusing on the significance of genuine cultural expression. Hand-woven Akwete is not merely a product; it embodies the identity, history, and artistry of the Igbo people. The influx of fake or pirated versions threatens this authenticity, reducing a deeply meaningful cultural artifact to a mass-produced commodity. As counterfeit Akwete becomes more prevalent, the distinction between genuine and imitation blurs in the eyes of consumers, undermining the perceived value and symbolic importance of authentic hand-woven cloth. This not only affects market prices but also diminishes the pride and cultural continuity of the weaving tradition.

5. Conclusion

This study compared the cheap machine-made Akwete- Igbo woven textiles and the genuine hand-woven fabrics and their impact on Akwete weavers. In the materials and quality of these fabrics studied, the hand-made and machine-made differ a lot; the hand- made produces unique, durable, and high-quality fabrics with intricate patterns, while the machine-made are lower-quality textiles. Hand-woven Akwete fabrics embody Igbo heritage, tradition, and identity; each piece carries cultural meanings and personal artistry. While machine-made lacks cultural authenticity and symbolic value; mainly valued for cost and accessibility. Hand-woven supports local weavers and sustains traditional livelihoods through its

higher market value. Machine-made undermines the market for authentic weavers and threatens weavers' economic stability. Hand woven are more expensive due to craftsmanship and limited availability. It is not readily available in open markets, while machine-made fabrics are more affordable, widely available, and appeal to the mass market. Hand-woven Akwete fabrics are heavier depending on the cloth count, and the selvedges are different from each other, while the machine-made appears smoother than the hand-made. This textile piracy of indigenous weavers has reduced patronage, causes erosion of cultural identity and symbolic value, violates intellectual property, threatens intergenerational knowledge transfer, and causes a decline in social and ceremonial Prestige.

The interplay of economic, technological, ethical, and cultural forces analysed through these four theories demonstrates that the impact of pirated, machine-made Akwete cloth extends beyond economics. It disrupts cultural transmission, erodes the status of indigenous weavers, and threatens the authenticity and integrity of Igbo textile heritage. Efforts to protect and promote authentic hand-woven Akwete must therefore address not just market dynamics but also issues of cultural ownership, technological change, and the preservation of meaningful cultural expression. Therefore, this study suggests that the intellectual property and copyrights of these products must not be violated; the government should ensure that the original hand-woven Akwete are protected from fakes.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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