Potential inhibitory properties of selected plant secondary metabolites from local plant families in the Philippines against AcrAB-TolC drug efflux pump system of *E. coli*: An *In silico* analysis

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**Abstract**

Antibiotics heralded an approach to controlling and ending infectious diseases caused by bacteria. However, these life-saving drugs have begun to lose their efficacy as various bacteria have gained a significant level of antibiotic resistance over the years. Amidst these bacterial survival mechanisms, plant secondary metabolites provide a possible countermeasure against this phenomenon because of their defense mechanisms. Through *in silico* analytic procedures, nine selected plant secondary metabolites from *Ixora coccinea*, *Mimosa pudica*, and *Origaniun vulgar*, in the Philippines were molecularly docked using AutoDock simulation software and Biovia Discovery Studio against the RND efflux pump system, AcrAB-TolC of *E. coli*. All of the selected metabolites showed negative binding energies implying high ligand-receptor affinity and good stability, especially the secondary metabolites of *I. coccinea*. Metabolites that have remarkable properties similar to the existing efflux pump inhibitors include lupeol, quercetin, galangin, kaempferol, and ursolic acid.

**Keywords:** Plant secondary metabolites, AcrAB-TolC drug efflux pump, *E. coli*, efflux pump inhibitors, phytochemistry

**Introduction**

Nearly a century has passed since the discovery of antibiotics, which revolutionized the medical world and led to significantly reduced number of disease-related fatalities during the early years of its discovery. However, these drugs and antibiotics that once saved countless lives have started losing efficacy against the bacteria they were made to combat. Antibiotic resistance, particularly multidrug resistance (MDR), has become a public health problem [1]. Multidrug-resistant infections are correlated to poor clinical outcomes, and there is a growing concern that pan-resistant strains will lead to some ailments becoming completely untreatable. Resistance to antibiotics typically occurs due to drug modification/inactivation, target site mutation, and reduced accumulation due to decreased permeability and increased efflux pump activity [2].

Efflux pumps are membrane-spanning proteins situated in the cytoplasmic membrane of eukaryotic and prokaryotic cells. These have been reported to contribute significantly to the issue of antibiotic resistance [2,3]. Furthermore, it is described as a key mechanism in antibiotic resistance, particularly in gram-negative bacteria. These efflux pumps essentially allow microorganisms to regulate their internal environment by removing toxic substances, as well as metabolites, quorum sensing molecules, and antimicrobial agents [3]. The efflux pumps can be composed of either a single component or multiple components, with the latter being only exclusive to gram-negative bacteria. These pumps are classified into six families based on the number of components, transmembrane spanning regions, energy source, and the types of molecules they specifically export [3,4]. The six families classify into: (1) the ATP-binding cassette (ABC) superfamily, (2) the major facilitator superfamily (MFS), (3) the multidrug and toxic compound extrusion (MATE), (4) the small multidrug resistance (SMR) family, (5) the resistance-nodulation-division (RND) superfamily, and (6) the drug metabolite transporter (DMT) superfamily [4]. Initially observed as a mechanism of resistance to tetracycline in *Escherichia coli*, the activities of the efflux pumps have been observed within many organisms, wherein they have become increasingly treated as important determinants to antimicrobial resistance [4].
Gram-negative bacteria possess an outer membrane that protects them from a wide range of antibiotics and detergents that would typically damage the bacteria itself [5]. Most antibiotics pass the outer membrane to lock onto their respective targets, such as hydrophilic drugs passing through the porins or hydrophobic drugs entering through the diffusion pathway. However, its outer membrane can alter its hydrophobic properties or cause a mutation within its porins to grant the bacteria resistance to various antibiotics, which boosts the gram-negative bacteria’s capabilities of fighting against antibiotics [6]. Furthermore, the pathogenesis of gram-negative bacteria rely on the assemblies of tripartite protein spanning their double membrane to extrude the antibiotics from the cell. This tripartite complex consists of a periplasmic membrane fusion protein, outer membrane protein, and inner membrane protein of the RND family [7]. The recent successes in determining the structure and analyzing the functions of MexB and AcrB components of the MexAB-OmpC and AcrAB-ToIC drug efflux pump systems have significantly contributed to understanding the mechanism of efflux inhibition [7].

As the modern means of defense against bacteria weaken, it is only natural to search for other pathways to negate the rise of antibiotic resistance. Since ancient times, people have always employed various plants and their derivatives for medicinal purposes, including treating infectious diseases. In eastern medicine, the plants’ role in medicinal treatment has always been prevalent throughout the years, and only until recently, western medicine started using herbal extracts as potential therapeutic agents [8]. In addition to low cost, high accessibility, and availability, herbal extracts are abundant sources of various plant secondary metabolites with high therapeutic value. This would give reason to the rising attention medicinal plants have been gaining as about 40% of modern medicine was derived from phytochemicals. The remedial effects of these medicinal plants are highly contributed by a mixture of substances called plant secondary metabolites. Plant secondary metabolites are a diverse group of biochemical substances produced by the plant cell through secondary metabolic pathways derived from the primary metabolic pathways [9]. Compared to their direct counterparts that mainly focus on survival, plant secondary metabolites play the role of a defender against different kinds of threats, including microbes [8, 9].

To this day, there are about 200,000 different plant secondary metabolites that have been isolated [10]. A variety of plants use plant secondary metabolites as a defense mechanism against pathogens, which means that they can either partially or entirely completely inhibit some microorganisms’ proliferation. Plant-derived compounds have also been known to directly interfere with the main pathogenic process, potentially decreasing the bacteria’s chances of developing drug resistance. Thus, using these compounds in association with traditional antibiotics like methicillin, which have lost their efficacy, is promising as it brings the idea of possibly reusing these old antibiotics that they may be able to overcome the bacteria’s MDR pump systems [10]. This in silico study investigated the feasibility of secondary plant metabolites from local plant sources in the Philippines as the main sources of inhibitors for E. coli’s AcrAB-ToIC drug efflux pump system. Specifically, it explored the inhibitory properties of the selected secondary metabolites through in silico analysis.

Materials and Methods
Numerous plants in nature possess various secondary metabolites. These plant secondary metabolites could effectively disrupt the efflux pump systems, thereby contributing to the growing case of antibiotic resistance. The local plant species used as samples for this study are the following species: Isora coccinea, Mimosa pudica, and Origanum vulgare. These are known for their medicinal uses. Furthermore, the basis for these selected widespread plants is because of their reported bioactivities and availability. Selected secondary metabolites from these plant species were studied for further analysis, to ascertain their antibacterial capacity, chemical structure, and purity. Upon blind molecular docking through AutoDock simulation software, the binding energies and inhibition constants of the analyzed data were also compared to existing efflux pump inhibitors, artesunate and phenylalanyl arginyl β-naphthylamide (PAβN).

Ligands
Information about the various plant secondary metabolites used in this study were gathered from databases containing a large collection of chemical information, particularly PubChem. Such information mainly includes their three-dimensional structure, conformation, and their sequence. The metabolites in Table 1 were chosen based on the reported bioactivities from other references [11, 12, 13, 14].

As for the existing efflux pump inhibitors, artesunate and PAβN, these were chosen to further discuss the data gathered from the selected metabolites of the subjects in the study [24, 25].

Subsequently, these metabolites were minimized through UCSF Chimera before removing heteroatoms and water molecules using Biovia Discovery Studio.

Table 1: Selected metabolites of the subjects in the study

| Ligand       | M. pudica       | I. coccinea     | O. vulgare   |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Mimosine     | 3862            | Ursolic acid    | 64945        |
| Orientin     | 5281675         | Quercetin       | 5280343      |
| Galangin     | 5281616         | Lupeol          | 259846       |

Table 2: Selected existing efflux pump inhibitors in the study.

| Ligand       | PubChem CID    |
|--------------|----------------|
| Artesunate   | 6917864        |
| PAβN         | 443301         |

Receptors
The receptors used for the molecular docking of the metabolites in the study were obtained from Research Collaboratory for Structural Bioinformatics Protein Data Bank (PDB) [28]. The AcrAB-ToIC drug efflux pump system of E. coli was divided into three sections: (1) AcrA, (2) AcrB, and (3) TolC. These sections were minimized through Avogadro prior to visualization using Biovia Discovery Studio.

Results and Discussion
Among the three plants, the secondary metabolites of I. coccinea exhibited the lowest potential energies using the
AcrAB-TolC efflux pump system of *E. coli*. Lupeol had the lowest binding energy, making it the most stable metabolite. Moreover, the results for stability of lupeol in the molecular docking agree with Muktar et al. (2018) [29]. The isolated lupeol in the root bark of *Ficus sycomorus* as a potential antibacterial agent is stable and effectively works against ciprofloxacin. Furthermore, the values of binding energy for the metabolites of *M. pudica* and *O. vulgare* were close to each other. The nine selected metabolites showed negative binding energies implying good stability using *E. coli*’s TolC efflux pump system.

Table 3: Binding energy and kl of selected plant secondary metabolites using AcrA efflux pump of *E. coli*.

| Plant     | Secondary metabolite | Bind energy | kl  |
|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----|
| *I. coccinea* | Ursolic acid         | -6.83       | 9.89 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Quercetin            | -6.42       | 107.14 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Lupeol               | -8.23       | 932.83 nM |
| *M. pudica*    | Mimosine             | -3.51       | 2.65 mM |
| *M. pudica*    | Orientin             | -3.4        | 3.22 mM |
| *M. pudica*    | Galangin             | -6.1        | 33.6 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Kaempferol           | -5.67       | 69.41 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Caffeic acid         | -4.39       | 609.1 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Rosmarinic acid      | -3.2        | 4.51 mM |

Table 4: Binding energy and kl of selected plant secondary metabolites using AcrB efflux pump of *E. coli*.

| Plant     | Secondary metabolite | Bind energy | kl  |
|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----|
| *I. coccinea* | Ursolic acid         | -7.33       | 4.25 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Quercetin            | -5.37       | 115.73 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Lupeol               | -8.7        | 421.55 nM |
| *M. pudica*    | Mimosine             | -3.17       | 4.75 mM |
| *M. pudica*    | Orientin             | -4.1        | 996.09 uM |
| *M. pudica*    | Galangin             | -5.6        | 78.67 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Kaempferol           | -5.83       | 53.29 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Caffeic acid         | -4.09       | 1.0 mM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Rosmarinic acid      | -2.89       | 7.62 mM |

Table 5: Binding energy and kl of selected plant secondary metabolites using TolC efflux pump of *E. coli*.

| Plant     | Secondary metabolite | Bind energy | kl  |
|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----|
| *I. coccinea* | Ursolic acid         | -7.33       | 4.25 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Quercetin            | -4.47       | 525.29 uM |
| *I. coccinea* | Lupeol               | -8.23       | 930.28 nM |
| *M. pudica*    | Mimosine             | -3.42       | 3.11 mM |
| *M. pudica*    | Orientin             | -4.97       | 227.39 uM |
| *M. pudica*    | Galangin             | -4.1        | 996.09 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Kaempferol           | -4.7        | 360.88 uM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Caffeic acid         | -3.94       | 1.29 mM |
| *O. vulgare*   | Rosmarinic acid      | -2.89       | 7.62 mM |

Table 6: Binding energy and kl of existing EPIs using AcrAB-TolC efflux pump of *E. coli*.

| EPIs      | AcrA Bind energy | kl  | AcrB Bind energy | kl  | TolC Bind energy | kl  |
|-----------|------------------|-----|------------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| Artesunate| -5.28            | 134.33 uM | -5.61 | 76.62 uM | -5.13 | 173.58 uM |
| PaβN      | -4.4             | 590.75 uM | -7.24 | 4.9 uM | -6.72 | 11.84 uM |

Table 7: Favorable (F) and less-favorable (LF) binding energies of selected secondary plant metabolites based on Artesunate’s values.

| Selected Secondary Metabolite | AcrA Artesunate: -5.28 | | AcrB Artesunate: -5.61 | | TolC Artesunate: -5.13 |
|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Ursolic acid                 | -6.83                  | F                      | -7.33                  | F                      | -7.33                  | F                      |
| Quercetin                    | -6.42                  | F                      | -5.37                  | L                      | -4.47                  | L                      |
| Lupeol                       | -8.23                  | F                      | -8.7                   | F                      | -8.23                  | F                      |
| Mimosine                     | -3.51                  | L                      | -3.17                  | L                      | -3.42                  | L                      |
| Orientin                     | -3.4                   | L                      | -4.1                   | L                      | -4.97                  | L                      |
| Galangin                     | -6.1                   | F                      | -5.6                   | F                      | -4.1                   | L                      |
| Kaempferol                   | -5.67                  | F                      | -5.83                  | F                      | -4.7                   | L                      |
| Caffeic acid                 | -4.39                  | L                      | -4.09                  | L                      | -3.94                  | L                      |
| Rosmarinic acid              | -3.2                   | L                      | -2.89                  | L                      | -2.89                  | L                      |
Table 8: Favorable (F) and less-favorable (LF) binding energies of selected secondary plant metabolites based on PAβN’s values.

| Selected Secondary Metabolite | AcrA PAβN: -4.4 | AcrB PAβN: -6.82 | TolC PAβN: -6.72 |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Bind energy                  | F/L              | Bind energy      | F/L              | Bind energy      | F/L              |
| Ursolic acid                 | -6.83            | F                | -7.33            | F                | -7.33            | F                |
| Quercetin                    | -6.42            | F                | -5.37            | L                | -4.47            | L                |
| Lupeol                       | -8.23            | F                | -8.7             | F                | -8.23            | F                |
| Mimosine                     | -3.51            | L                | -3.17            | L                | -3.42            | L                |
| Orientin                     | -3.4             | L                | -4.1             | L                | -4.97            | L                |
| Galangin                     | -6.1             | F                | -5.6             | F                | -4.1             | L                |
| Kaempferol                   | -5.67            | F                | -5.83            | F                | -4.7             | L                |
| Caffeic acid                 | -4.39            | F                | -4.09            | L                | -3.94            | L                |
| Rosmarinic acid              | -3.2             | L                | -2.89            | L                | -2.89            | L                |

The secondary metabolites were divided into two groups: favorable and less favorable. The binding energies of the existing EPIs, artesunate and PAβN, were used to classify them, and their values were set as the standard for comparison. A metabolite is classed as less favorable if its observed values are lower than the standards, whereas it has been labeled as favorable if higher. The researchers fixed a parameter such that when results are -0.01 below the standard, it can still be labeled as favorable since binding has already been established and the difference is too little to be disregarded. This form of classification was conducted to further demonstrate that all selected secondary metabolites have binding energies but only differ by a certain degree.

Fig 1: Comparison of (A) binding energy and (B) kI of selected plant secondary metabolites with existing EPIs using AcrA efflux pump of E. coli.
Fig 2: Comparison of (A) binding energy and (B) kI of selected plant secondary metabolites with existing EPIs using AcrB efflux pump of *E. coli*.
In contrast, inhibition constant (kI) indicates the potency of an inhibitor wherein the lower the kI value, the higher its inhibition activity [30]. In the case of the interactions of the secondary metabolites with the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump system of *E. coli*, lupeol produced the lowest inhibition constant. Therefore, it suggests an increased likelihood of the metabolite inhibiting the efflux pump system. The respective inhibition constants of all metabolites varied depending on the efflux pump system. Some metabolites presented low binding energy towards one efflux pump system while displaying a high inhibition constant. This would suggest that although the metabolite’s interaction with the efflux pump system is stable due to the low binding energy, there are some secondary metabolites whose inhibition activity may not be strong enough to inhibit the activities of the efflux pump successfully.

To further screen the metabolites, their respective values were compared to the binding energy and inhibition constants of existing efflux pump inhibitors, artesunate and PAβN, as seen in Table 6. Artesunate is associated with suppressing AcrAB-TolC by significantly increasing β-lactam antibacterial effect against *E. coli* clinical strain [31]. On the other hand, PAβN was the first inhibitor for RND efflux pumps [24].
Lupeol showed the greatest stability and strongest inhibition activity among all the selected plant secondary metabolites across the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump system. Comparing the results obtained from docking the known EPIs against the metabolites, lupeol presents more favorable inhibition as it has lower binding energy and $k_I$. It also surpasses the binding energy of artesunate and PAβN with regards to the efflux pump system. Lupeol shows alkyl, pi-alkyl, conventional hydrogen bonds, and pi-sigma bonds for AcrA, alkyl groups for AcrB, and conventional hydrogen bond and alkyl bond for TolC.

Compared to rosmarinic acid, which showed less binding energy and inhibition constant, conventional hydrogen bond, carbon hydrogen bond, and Pi-Pi T-shaped were observed for AcrA, conventional hydrogen bond, Pi-Pi stacked bonds, and Pi-alkyl bonds for AcrB, and conventional hydrogen bonds, Pi-Donor hydrogen bond, pi-sigma bond, and Pi-alkyl bonds for TolC.

Among the other metabolites that have remarkable properties similar to the existing EPIs are quercetin, galangin, kaempferol, and ursolic acid. Based on the 2D diagrams of the metabolites, the five metabolites and the existing EPIs have similar interactions. Particularly, these included conventional hydrogen, alkyl, and pi-alkyl interactions. The results obtained also agree with Sharma et al. (2019) and Waditzer and Bucar (2021). Thus, these five plant secondary metabolites can be stable inhibitors of the RND efflux pump system, AcrAB-TolC of *E. coli*.

To further support the results, the phytochemicals of *I. coccinea*, such as quercetin, lupeol, and ursolic acid, are abundant in many medicinal plants and have a broad spectrum of pharmacological activities. These include antimicrobial and antibacterial properties [33, 34]. Other properties of *I. coccinea* that have been reported are anti-inflammatory and antimitotic activities from the leaves, cytotoxic and antitumor properties from the flowers [35].

In contrast, *M. pudica* is a popular ornamental plant among folk healers valued for its antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, diuretic, and hypoglycemic properties (Gupta et al., 2019). Phytochemical studies on this plant species revealed that the presence of non-protein amino acid (mimosine), flavonoids (galangin) flavone (orientin), sterols, tannins, terpenoids, and alkaloids were reported of antibacterial activities against human pathogens, *E. coli*, *B. subtilis*, *S. pyogenes*, *P. mirabilis*, and *P. fluorescens* [36]. Galangin alone caused a 100,000 fold decrease in the viability of *S. aureus* [37].

Finally, *O. vulgare* is known for its phytochemicals that can inhibit gram-positive and gram-negative bacteria by disrupting the integrity and permeability of the cell membrane [38, 39]. Kaempferol, a natural phenolic compound, is known for its antibacterial and bacteriostatic effects. Through the broth microdilution method, Wu et al. (2013) concluded a
significant positive correlation between its antibacterial capacity and membrane rigidification.

Conclusion and Recommendation
It has been established through the molecular docking results that the selected plant secondary metabolites can be efficient EPIs against the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump system of *E. coli*. All of the docked secondary metabolites had relatively low binding energies and inhibition constants. Five of the nine selected plant secondary metabolites, namely lupeol, quercetin, galangin, kaempferol, and ursolic acid, showed the potential to be stable inhibitors of the drug efflux pump system. Based on the 2D diagrams, the five plant secondary metabolites and existing EPIs shared similar interactions, particularly conventional hydrogen, alkyl, and pi-alkyl bonds. It is also worth noting that all the selected metabolites from the plant species *I. coccinea* exhibited excellent binding energy and inhibition constant, suggesting that *I. coccinea* would contain other metabolites that would serve as potential EPIs.

In terms of the future direction of this study, it would be prudent to screen and discover other local plant families such as crown-of-thorns (*Euphorbia milii*), gumamela (*H. rosasinensis*), and white kalachuchi (*P. obtusa*), which could contain the selected metabolites used in the docking procedure. In addition, it would be beneficial to test other metabolites found in *I. coccinea*, *M. pudica*, and *O. vulgare* and determine if they could also become EPIs for the development of cost-effective drugs.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial, or otherwise.

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