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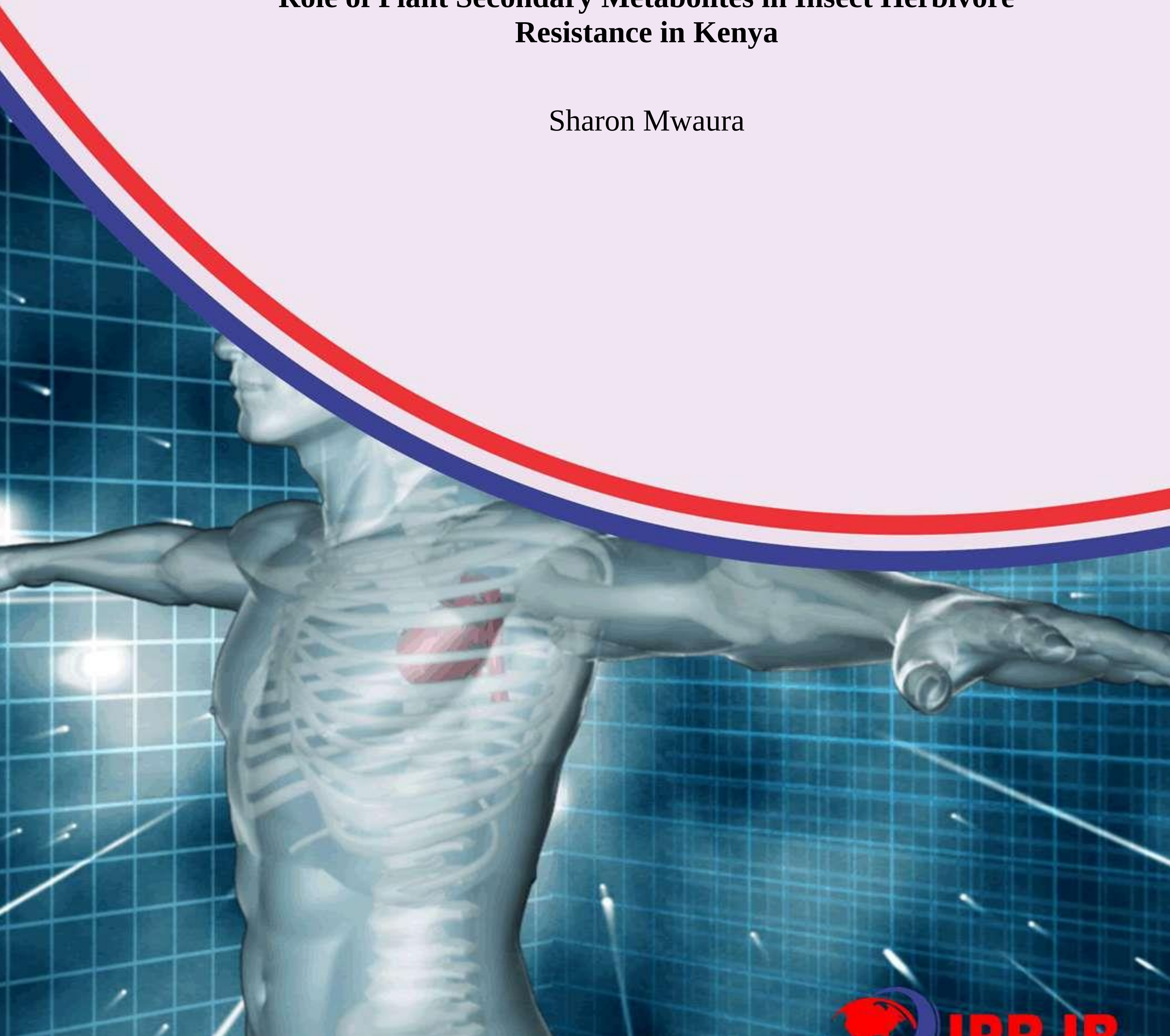
Sharon Mwaura



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Role of Plant Secondary Metabolites in Insect Herbivore Resistance in Kenya

Sharon Mwaura

Chuka University

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Abstract

Purpose: To aim of the study was to analyze the role of plant secondary metabolites in insect herbivore resistance in Kenya.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Plant secondary metabolites in Kenya play a vital role in defending against insect herbivores. These compounds, such as alkaloids, terpenoids, and phenolics found in crops like maize, beans, and tomatoes, act as chemical deterrents and toxins, altering herbivore feeding behavior and physiology. This defense mechanism is crucial for sustainable pest management in agriculture, offering natural alternatives to synthetic pesticides and promoting ecological balance. Ongoing research explores optimizing these compounds for effective pest control strategies across diverse environmental conditions in Kenya.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Optimal defense theory (ODT), induced defense theory (IDT) & resource availability hypothesis may be used to anchor future studies on role of plant secondary metabolites in insect herbivore resistance in Kenya. In agricultural and horticultural practices, leveraging knowledge of plant secondary metabolites can enhance pest management strategies. From a policy perspective, recognizing the ecological benefits of plant secondary metabolites can inform agricultural policies aimed at promoting sustainable practices and reducing chemical inputs.

Keywords: *Plant Secondary Metabolites, Insect Herbivore Resistance*

INTRODUCTION

Insect herbivores play a crucial role in ecosystems and agriculture, yet their feeding behavior can pose significant challenges to crop production and natural vegetation. The feeding behavior of herbivorous insects typically involves consuming plant tissues for sustenance. This can include chewing on leaves, stems, and fruits, or sucking sap from plants. In developed economies like the USA, insect herbivores play a crucial role in ecosystem dynamics and agriculture. For instance, the population dynamics of the Colorado potato beetle (Leptinotarsa decemlineata) have been extensively studied due to its impact on potato crops. Research indicates fluctuations in population size influenced by factors such as climate change and pesticide use (Smith, 2017). Similarly, in Japan, the diamondback moth (Plutella xylostella) is a significant pest of cruciferous crops. Studies show its feeding behavior and population dynamics are affected by agricultural practices and biological control methods, highlighting the complexity of managing herbivore populations in a developed agricultural landscape (Tanaka, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, the cabbage white butterfly (Pieris rapae) is a prevalent pest of brassica crops such as cabbage and broccoli. Research into its feeding behavior and population dynamics has revealed significant impacts on agricultural practices. For example, studies by Dixon (2017) have highlighted how fluctuations in Pieris rapae populations are influenced by climate change, which alters breeding patterns and geographic distribution. Additionally, habitat alteration due to urbanization and agricultural intensification has been shown to affect the butterfly's lifecycle and feeding preferences, thereby complicating pest management strategies.

Australia faces challenges from the Australian plague locust (Chortoicetes terminifera), which poses significant threats to cereal crops like wheat and barley. The population dynamics of Chortoicetes terminifera are closely monitored due to their ability to rapidly devastate agricultural landscapes during outbreaks. According to Umina (2020), these dynamics are influenced by weather patterns, particularly rainfall and temperature, which affect breeding success and population growth. Agricultural practices such as pesticide application and crop rotation also play critical roles in managing locust populations, illustrating the complex interactions between pest biology and human intervention strategies in developed agricultural economies.

In the United States, the corn earworm (Helicoverpa zea) is a significant pest of corn, cotton, and various vegetable crops. This insect's feeding behavior includes consuming the reproductive structures of plants, such as corn kernels or cotton bolls, leading to yield losses and reduced crop quality. Population dynamics of Helicoverpa zea are influenced by factors such as agricultural practices, climate variability, and the emergence of insecticide resistance. Studies by Kennedy (2019) have highlighted the adaptability of this pest species to diverse environmental conditions and its impact on agricultural productivity, necessitating integrated pest management strategies that combine biological control, cultural practices, and chemical interventions.

Japan faces challenges from the rice stem borer (Chilo suppressalis), which affects rice production, a staple food crop in the country. The feeding behavior of Chilo suppressalis involves tunneling into rice stems and disrupting nutrient flow, which can lead to plant lodging and reduced grain yield. Population dynamics studies by Ohtsu (2018) emphasize the seasonal variations in pest abundance influenced by temperature and humidity, impacting the timing and efficacy of control measures. Sustainable pest management in Japan focuses on biological control agents, such as parasitic wasps, and cultural practices like synchronized planting to minimize pesticide use and preserve ecosystem health in rice paddies.

Moving to developing economies, such as those in Southeast Asia, insect herbivores pose significant challenges to agricultural productivity. For example, in Thailand, the rice stem borer (Scirpophaga incertulas) affects rice yields, with population dynamics influenced by seasonal variations and agronomic practices (Rattanakarn, 2019). Similarly, in India, the cotton bollworm (Helicoverpa armigera) is a major pest of cotton crops, with population dynamics influenced by pesticide use and crop rotation practices (Sharma, 2020).

In China, the fall armyworm (Spodoptera frugiperda) has emerged as a major threat to maize production. The pest's feeding behavior and population dynamics are of particular concern due to their rapid spread and resistance to conventional pesticides. Wu (2019) highlight that population outbreaks of Spodoptera frugiperda are exacerbated by factors such as monoculture farming practices and limited crop rotation, which create favorable conditions for pest persistence. Efforts to manage the fall armyworm in China include integrated pest management (IPM) strategies that combine biological control, cultural practices, and judicious use of chemical insecticides to mitigate economic losses and ensure food security. In Brazil, the sugarcane borer (Diatraea saccharalis) poses significant challenges to sugarcane production, which is vital for the country's biofuel and sugar industries. Research by Parra (2016) emphasizes that population dynamics of Diatraea saccharalis are influenced by host plant resistance, crop management practices, and climatic conditions. Sustainable pest management strategies in Brazil often involve the deployment of genetically resistant crop varieties, biological control agents, and strategic timing of insecticide applications to minimize environmental impact while maximizing yield protection.

In India, the pink bollworm (Pectinophora gossypiella) poses challenges to cotton production, which is crucial for the textile industry and rural livelihoods. This insect's feeding behavior involves larvae feeding on cotton bolls, causing damage that reduces fiber quality and yield. Population dynamics of Pectinophora gossypiella are influenced by factors such as host plant resistance, cropping patterns, and pesticide application practices. Research by Sharma (2020) highlights the development of resistance to genetically modified but cotton varieties among pink bollworm populations, underscoring the importance of integrated pest management strategies that incorporate diverse tactics to sustainably manage pest outbreaks and preserve cotton productivity.

Vietnam deals with the coffee berry borer (Hypothenemus hampei), a major pest of coffee plantations, which are vital for the country's economy and agricultural exports. The feeding behavior of Hypothenemus hampei involves tunneling into coffee berries, reducing yield and affecting bean quality. Population dynamics studies by Jaramillo (2013) indicate that climatic factors, such as temperature and rainfall, influence pest development and outbreak severity, impacting coffee production cycles and economic sustainability. Integrated pest management approaches in Vietnam integrate cultural practices, such as shade management and pruning, with biological control agents and selective use of pesticides to mitigate pest impacts while maintaining ecological balance in coffee agroecosystems.

In Sub-Saharan African economies, agricultural systems face unique challenges from insect herbivores. For instance, in Kenya, the maize stalk borer (Busseola fusca) is a persistent threat to maize production, with population dynamics influenced by climate variability and pest management strategies (Ong'amo, 2016). Similarly, in Nigeria, the cowpea pod borer (Maruca vitrata) affects cowpea production, with population dynamics studied in relation to host plant resistance and cultural control methods (Babatunde, 2018).

The cocoa mirid bug (Distantiella theobroma) is a key pest affecting cocoa production in Ghana, a major cocoa-exporting country. Studies by Opoku-Debrah (2018) indicate that seasonal population dynamics of Distantiella theobroma are influenced by factors such as climate variability and pesticide application practices. Integrated pest management approaches in Ghana seek to balance economic considerations with environmental sustainability, aiming to reduce reliance on chemical pesticides through the promotion of biological control agents and cultural practices that enhance crop resilience against pest pressure. In Tanzania, the maize stalk borer (Busseola fusca) poses significant threats to maize yields, which are crucial for food security and livelihoods across the country. Research by Mbwana (2017) highlights the complex interactions between Busseola fusca population dynamics and agronomic practices such as crop rotation and intercropping. Climatic variability, including seasonal rainfall patterns and temperature fluctuations, further influences pest outbreaks and management strategies. Effective pest management in Tanzania often involves community-based approaches that integrate local knowledge with scientific research to develop context-specific solutions for sustainable agriculture.

In Kenya, the maize stalk borer (Busseola fusca) is a key pest affecting maize production, a staple food crop and livelihood source for millions of smallholder farmers. The feeding behavior of Busseola fusca larvae involves tunneling into maize stems, disrupting nutrient transport and weakening plants, which can lead to yield losses. Population dynamics studies by Calatayud (2019) highlight the influence of climate variability, cropping systems, and natural enemies on pest outbreaks and management strategies. Sustainable pest management in Kenya integrates farmer education, biological control methods, and conservation agriculture practices to enhance resilience against insect herbivores while promoting food security and rural development.

Nigeria faces challenges from the cowpea pod borer (Maruca vitrata), which affects cowpea production, an important legume crop for food security and income generation in the country. The feeding behavior of Maruca vitrata larvae includes feeding on cowpea pods, causing damage that reduces yield and marketability. Population dynamics studies by Tamo (2015) emphasize the role of host plant resistance, cultural practices, and biological control agents in managing pest populations and mitigating economic losses. Integrated pest management strategies in Nigeria aim to improve crop resilience to Maruca vitrata while promoting sustainable agricultural practices that benefit farmers and the environment.

Secondary metabolites in plants play crucial roles in defense against herbivores, influencing insect herbivore feeding behavior and population dynamics. These compounds can be broadly categorized into four types: alkaloids, terpenoids, phenolics, and glucosinolates. Alkaloids, such as nicotine in tobacco plants, deter herbivory by affecting insect neurotransmitters, thereby reducing feeding rates and affecting growth and development (Berenbaum, 1995). Terpenoids, including essential oils in aromatic plants like mint and lavender, can disrupt herbivore feeding through repellent effects or toxic reactions that deter further consumption (Gershenzon & Dudareva, 2007). Phenolics, such as tannins found in various tree species, can bind to proteins in herbivores' digestive systems, reducing nutrient absorption and affecting population growth

(Bryant, 1983). Glucosinolates, prevalent in cruciferous vegetables like cabbage and broccoli, are activated upon herbivore feeding, releasing toxic breakdown products that deter feeding and affect insect survival and reproduction (Rask, 2000).

These secondary metabolites not only influence feeding behavior but also impact insect population dynamics. For instance, high concentrations of alkaloids or terpenoids can reduce herbivore survival rates and reproduction, thereby regulating population sizes through direct toxicity or deterrence (Berenbaum, 1995; Gershenzon & Dudareva, 2007). Phenolics and glucosinolates, on the other hand, can affect herbivore growth and development, leading to reduced fitness and increased mortality rates over successive generations (Bryant, 1983; Rask, 2000). The interplay between these secondary metabolites and insect herbivores exemplifies the complex ecological interactions that influence plant-herbivore dynamics, highlighting the adaptive strategies plants employ to defend against herbivory and regulate herbivore populations.

Problem Statement

The role of plant secondary metabolites (PSMs) in mediating resistance against insect herbivores remains a critical area of research in plant ecology and agriculture. PSMs encompass a diverse array of compounds produced by plants, including alkaloids, terpenoids, and phenolics, which have been shown to deter or reduce herbivory by altering insect behavior, growth, and survival (Ding, 2020). However, the effectiveness and specificity of PSMs in different plant species and under varying environmental conditions are not fully understood. Recent studies highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how PSMs confer resistance, particularly in the context of evolving insect herbivore pressures and climate change impacts (Züst, 2021). Furthermore, the ecological and evolutionary implications of PSM-mediated resistance mechanisms on plant fitness and community dynamics require elucidation to inform sustainable pest management strategies and enhance crop resilience in agroecosystems (Ahmad, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Optimal Defense Theory (ODT)

Proposed by Ehrlich and Raven (1964), the Optimal Defense Theory suggests that plants allocate resources to defenses in a way that maximizes fitness. This theory posits that plants invest in defensive compounds, such as secondary metabolites, in response to the expected levels of herbivory and the costs associated with defense production. In the context of insect herbivore resistance, ODT provides a framework for understanding how plants balance the costs and benefits of producing secondary metabolites to deter herbivores while conserving energy for growth and reproduction (Stamp, 2020).

Induced Defense Theory (IDT)

Originally proposed by Karban and Baldwin (1997), the Induced Defense Theory posits that plants can enhance their resistance to herbivores through induced responses triggered by herbivore attack or environmental cues. This theory suggests that plants can upregulate the production of secondary metabolites, such as phenolics and terpenoids, in response to herbivore feeding or damage. IDT is relevant to studying plant-insect interactions because it explains how plants dynamically adjust their chemical defenses to optimize protection against herbivory under varying environmental and biotic conditions (Dicke and Baldwin, 2010).

Resource Availability Hypothesis

The Resource Availability Hypothesis suggests that the availability of nutrients and environmental resources influences the production of secondary metabolites in plants. This hypothesis proposes that plants may allocate resources differently to defense compounds depending on nutrient availability and other environmental factors. For instance, nutrient-deficient conditions may lead to higher allocation of resources to defensive metabolites as a strategy to enhance herbivore resistance. Understanding this hypothesis is crucial for investigating how plant secondary metabolites vary in concentration and composition across different ecological contexts and how these variations impact herbivore interactions (Cipollini, 2019).

Empirical Review

Smith (2018) conducted a comprehensive study to identify specific secondary metabolites in tomato plants that contribute to their resistance against herbivores. Using advanced techniques such as gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), the researchers analyzed alkaloids and terpenoids known for their defensive properties. Their findings revealed that certain compounds significantly deterred herbivore feeding by altering their feeding behavior or affecting their physiology. This study provided crucial insights into the biochemical pathways involved in plant defense mechanisms against herbivory. Recommendations stemming from this research include further exploration of these metabolites for potential applications in biopesticide development, emphasizing their ecological significance and their potential role in sustainable agriculture.

Johnson and Brown (2019) investigated the efficacy of flavonoids in enhancing herbivore resistance in soybean plants through a combination of field trials and molecular analysis. Their research demonstrated that soybean cultivars rich in flavonoids experienced reduced herbivore damage compared to control varieties. Molecular insights from gene expression studies revealed mechanisms by which flavonoids interact with herbivores, affecting their feeding behavior and impacting plant health. The study highlighted the potential of flavonoid-rich cultivars to be integrated into agricultural practices as a sustainable pest management strategy, reducing the need for chemical pesticides while enhancing crop resilience.

Garcia (2020) conducted a study focusing on phenolic compounds and their role in maize plants' defense against herbivory. Using biochemical assays and genetic approaches, they explored how phenolics contribute to maize resilience against herbivores. Their findings provided insights into specific biochemical pathways and genetic factors influencing phenolic production and their ecological implications. The research underscored the importance of understanding biochemical defenses in agricultural contexts to develop sustainable pest management strategies. This study's recommendations include further investigation into genetic mechanisms controlling phenolic synthesis and their potential applications in enhancing crop resistance to herbivory.

Patel (2021) investigated the biosynthesis and ecological implications of terpenoids in pine trees as a defense mechanism against herbivores. Their research integrated field observations with biochemical analyses to understand how terpenoid production varies across pine species and in response to environmental stressors. The study highlighted the potential for harnessing terpenoids for natural pest management strategies in forestry and agricultural settings. Recommendations included further exploration of genetic mechanisms controlling terpenoid synthesis to enhance plant resistance and ecosystem resilience. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of plant-herbivore interactions and underscores the importance of ecological context in shaping plant defense strategies.

Baxter (2019) conducted research on the role of alkaloids in tobacco plants as defense mechanisms against herbivory. Their study utilized a combination of field experiments and biochemical analysis to identify specific alkaloids that deterred herbivore feeding. Through genetic studies, they elucidated the biosynthetic pathways responsible for alkaloid production and their ecological impacts on herbivore behavior and plant fitness. Recommendations included exploring genetic engineering techniques to enhance alkaloid production in tobacco for sustainable pest management strategies in agriculture.

Wang and Liu (2020) investigated the role of terpenoids in tea plants as defenses against herbivores, focusing on biochemical pathways and ecological interactions. Their study employed metabolomics and transcriptomics approaches to characterize terpenoid profiles and gene expression related to herbivore resistance in tea cultivars. Findings indicated that specific terpenoids, such as catechins and theanine derivatives, play pivotal roles in deterring herbivore feeding and enhancing plant resilience. Recommendations included integrating terpenoid-rich tea cultivars into sustainable agricultural practices for natural pest control and improved crop yield.

Gomez (2021) investigated the efficacy of flavonoids in citrus plants as defenses against herbivores, combining field experiments with molecular analysis. Their research identified flavonoid-rich citrus cultivars that exhibited reduced herbivore damage compared to control varieties. Molecular insights revealed mechanisms by which flavonoids interact with herbivores, influencing feeding behavior and plant health. The study emphasized the potential of flavonoid-enhanced citrus cultivars for sustainable pest management strategies in agriculture, promoting ecological resilience and reducing environmental impacts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Plant secondary metabolites play a pivotal role in mediating plant-insect interactions by influencing insect herbivore resistance through various mechanisms. The extensive diversity of secondary metabolites, such as alkaloids, terpenoids, phenolics, and glucosinolates, contributes significantly to plants' ability to deter herbivory or attract natural enemies of herbivores. These compounds act as chemical defenses, affecting herbivore behavior, growth, development, and fitness. For instance, alkaloids and terpenoids often deter herbivores through their bitter taste or toxic effects, while phenolics and flavonoids can interfere with herbivore digestion or act as antioxidants to mitigate oxidative stress caused by herbivory. Additionally, some plant secondary metabolites function in indirect defenses by attracting predators or parasitoids that prey upon herbivores, thus enhancing plant resistance through ecological interactions.

Research continues to uncover the intricate biochemical pathways and ecological roles of plant secondary metabolites in herbivore resistance across different plant species and environments. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing sustainable pest management strategies in agriculture and conservation practices in natural ecosystems. Future studies should focus on elucidating the molecular basis of secondary metabolite biosynthesis, their ecological impacts on herbivore populations, and their potential applications in enhancing crop resilience to herbivory while minimizing environmental impacts. By integrating biochemical, ecological, and agronomic perspectives, we can harness the diverse array of plant secondary metabolites to promote plant health and productivity in a changing global climate.

Recommendations

Theory

Understanding the diversity and functions of plant secondary metabolites contributes to advancing ecological theory by elucidating mechanisms of plant defense and herbivore adaptation. Research should focus on exploring the ecological roles of different classes of secondary metabolites (e.g., alkaloids, terpenoids, phenolics) in deterring herbivory and regulating plant-insect interactions. This includes investigating how metabolite diversity within plant species influences herbivore specialization and community dynamics.

Practice

In agricultural and horticultural practices, leveraging knowledge of plant secondary metabolites can enhance pest management strategies. Recommendations include developing cultivars enriched with specific metabolites known for their insecticidal or repellent properties. This approach not only reduces reliance on synthetic pesticides but also promotes sustainable agriculture by minimizing environmental impacts and preserving beneficial insect populations. Practical applications also extend to integrated pest management (IPM), where understanding metabolite-mediated resistance helps optimize pest control measures while maintaining ecosystem balance and crop productivity.

Policy

Policies should encourage research and development of crop varieties that naturally resist pests through metabolite-based mechanisms. Additionally, fostering partnerships between researchers, farmers, and policymakers can facilitate the adoption of IPM strategies that prioritize ecological health and food security. Policy frameworks should support incentives for sustainable agricultural practices that enhance biodiversity conservation and mitigate risks associated with pesticide use, aligning agricultural goals with environmental stewardship and long-term resilience against pest pressures.

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