

1 **Stiffness Properties of Recycled Concrete Aggregate/Polyethylene Plastic**
2 **Granules in Unbound Pavement Applications**

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Abstract

The growing population in the modern world has resulted in an increase in waste generation and stockpiles. There have been increasing concerns on how to sustainably reuse wastes in civil and geotechnical engineering applications. Two major municipal waste streams are plastic wastes and Recycled Concrete Aggregates (RCA) generated by demolition activities. A potential application for growing stockpiles of plastic and RCA wastes is in the construction of roads, as pavement base/subbases typically demand significant quantities of construction materials. In this research, RCA was blended with Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) and High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) plastics. A range of geotechnical tests such as California Bearing Ratio (CBR), Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS), and Repeated Load Triaxial (RLT) tests were conducted on RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE blends. Comparison of CBR, UCS and RLT results with those of typical quarry materials indicated that RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE can be used sustainably in the construction of pavement base/subbase layers. RLT testing results were further evaluated using resilient moduli models, to characterize the RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE performances under simulated traffic loads.

Keywords: Stiffness, Resilient Modulus, Recycled Materials, Polyethylene Plastic, Pavement Subbase, Pavement Base

65 **Introduction**

66 The high living standards and growing population in the modern world has led to an increasing
67 amount of waste production. Consequently, waste management has become a serious concern
68 globally (Choudhary et al. 2014). The conventional approach of waste management is
69 landfilling. However, this is not a proper solution due to many drawbacks such as high
70 landfilling costs and limited availability of land in many countries (Choudhary et al. 2014). As
71 a result, the need for other solutions for management of wastes is required. One of these
72 approaches is the application of waste materials in industries in which substantial amount of
73 materials is required, such as in civil engineering applications, and in road pavement
74 construction. However, usage of wastes in pavement bases/subbases requires sufficient
75 knowledge about the engineering and geotechnical properties of these waste materials.

76 Annually, approximately 190 million tonnes of plastics is produced in the world, of which 66
77 million tonnes is polyethylene. As an average, 8-12% of the total municipal waste stream
78 consists of plastics. This percentage varies from country to country, depending on factors, such
79 as lifestyle, quality of life and income level (Wong et al. 2015). In Australia, this percentage is
80 estimated to be about 16%, with an annual production of plastics waste of 2.24 million tons in
81 2008 (Bajracharya et al. 2016). Production of plastics has increased annually due to the
82 population growth and industrial applications as well as its low production cost. Plastic wastes
83 are a prime contributor to the increasing amounts of municipal waste (Meran et al. 2008). Two
84 products of the plastic industries are Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) and High Density
85 Polyethylene (HDPE). HDPE is stiffer, higher in tensile strength, and better in heat resistance,
86 while LDPE is more flexible (Schwartz 2002). The mechanical properties of HDPE and LDPE
87 including elongation and tensile strength have been reported by Meran et al. (2008). Research
88 on reinforcing civil engineering material with HDPE dates back to early 1990s when Benson
89 and Khire (1994) reinforced sand with HDPE strips and evaluated the geotechnical properties

90 of the reinforced blends. Reinforcement was shown to improve the California Bearing Ratio
91 (CBR), secant modulus, resilient modulus and shear strength of the sand. Studies have been
92 undertaken on using HDPE in form of strips as reinforcement for pavement material in the
93 subbase layer (Choudhary et al. 2014) and subgrades (Choudhary et al. 2010). Test results
94 showed improvement in some of the geotechnical properties, such as bearing capacity and
95 secant modulus of the specimens reinforced by HDPE strips. Another study conducted by Jha
96 et al. (2014) showed that application of HDPE strips enhanced the bearing capacity of industrial
97 wastes in pavement applications, and in flexible pavement construction. Evidently, only a few
98 studies have been done on LDPE, and studies on HDPE have used this material, solely in form
99 of strips or fibers.

100 Demolition activities are a major factor that results in increasing stockpiles of construction and
101 demolition wastes, including Recycled Concrete Aggregate (RCA), crushed brick, recycled
102 asphalt pavement and recycled glass (Arulrajah et al. 2014; Disfani et al. 2014). Application of
103 these materials in civil engineering construction projects were carried out recently by several
104 researchers, including Arulrajah et al. (2013 a), Gómez-Soberón (2002), McKelvey et al.
105 (2002), Poon and Chan (2006), Parnavithana and Mohajerani (2006), Courard et al. (2010)
106 and Rahman et al. (2014). RCA properties are more superior to typical quarry materials when
107 used in the construction of pavement layers (Arulrajah et al. 2014). This material was selected
108 to be blended with LDPE and HDPE granules in this research.

109 The granules are raw products of plastic recycling industries, and no further procedure is done
110 to turn them into strips of fibers. The aim is to investigate the applicability of these granules in
111 pavement base/subbase applications to reduce the need for landfilling. However, since the
112 polyethylene plastic in this research is intended to be used in form of granules instead of
113 reinforcing fibers, slight degradation of RCA properties is expected. Hence, a range of
114 geotechnical tests were conducted to evaluate the mechanical properties of the blends of

115 RCA/HDP and RCA/LDPE, especially in terms of stiffness and resilient modulus. HDPE and
116 LDPE plastics granules used were processed by-products obtained from plastic recycling.
117 Application of the processed granule products, if the requirements are met, is important since
118 it saves costs and effort needs to be spent to convert them into fibers or strips, but at the same
119 time fulfills the aim of reusing the waste plastics instead of dumping these in landfills.
120 Accordingly, a range of geotechnical tests were conducted to evaluate the mechanical and
121 stiffness properties of RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE blends. The concept used, in terms of using
122 RCA in blends with HDPE or LDPE for pavement base/subbase applications is novel and will
123 lead to a significant reduction of these waste materials being landfilled.

124 **Materials and Methods**

125 The materials used in this research included RCA blended with HDPE and LDPE granules.
126 These were provided from recycling industries in Victoria, Australia. **Table 1** presents the
127 properties of these waste materials.

128 **Figure 1** shows the particle size distribution of RCA, as well as blends of RCA with 3% and
129 5% of HDPE and LDPE contents. Evidently, the plastics contents did not cause significant
130 changes in the particle size distribution of the blends. **Figure 1** also shows images of HDPE
131 and LDPE granules.

132 Modified proctor method according to ASTM-D1557 (2012) was used to determine the
133 Optimum Moisture Content (OMC) and Maximum Dry Density (MDD) of the blends. In this
134 regard, specimens were compacted in five layers, each layer under 56 blows of the hammer, in
135 a mold with the diameter of 152.4 mm and height of 116.43 mm. Dry density versus moisture
136 content curves were then drawn in order to obtain the OMC and MDD of the blends. In order
137 to avoid segregation, care was taken when placing material for each layer in the mold, by
138 keeping the scoop as close as possible inside the mold when pouring the material. Also, in

139 order to examine the uniformity of the mixtures, one scoop of the blends was extracted and
140 spread on the table in a circular shape, dividing the material into 4 equal portions followed by
141 observing and comparing the quarters visually. No significant difference in the plastic content
142 of each quarter was observed.

143 Using the obtained OMC and plastic content of 5%, CBR samples were prepared in a 152.4
144 mm diameter mold in five layers each compacted under modified effort using 56 blows
145 according to ASTM-D1883 (2014). In this research, plastic contents were selected so that CBR
146 values of the blends would meet road authorities' requirements, which specify a CBR greater
147 than 80 for subbases and greater than 100 for bases. First, blends with plastic content of 5%
148 were prepared for determination of OMC. Then using the obtained values of OMC, CBR
149 samples were prepared and compacted. Based on obtained CBR values another plastic content,
150 being 3% was proposed.

151 Results of the compaction and CBR tests on blends of 95% RCA and 5% HDPE/LDPE are
152 presented in **Table 2**. Obviously, blending RCA with plastic granules with a low specific
153 gravity resulted in a low MDD. CBR values corresponding to 2.54 mm penetration for both
154 blends are about 100, which is the limit for pavement base layer application. As a result, in
155 order not to reach a CBR value lower than the authorities' requirements for applicability in
156 pavement base/subbase layers, blends of RCA with 5 and a lower plastic content, i.e., 3% were
157 selected as the following: RCA95/HDPE5, RCA5/LDPE5, RCA97/HDPE3, and
158 RCA97/LDPE3. Also, in order to investigate the result of introducing these plastic granules,
159 all tests were conducted on pure RCA as well. The lower limit of CBR for typical quarry
160 material is 80% (Arulrajah et al. 2013 b). Results of modified compaction and CBR tests on
161 the RCA97/HDPE3, and RCA97/LDPE3, as well as pure RCA are presented in **Table 2**.

162 Resilient modulus (M_r) is an important parameter required for structural design of pavement
163 layers. Hence, investigation of the changes in resilient behavior of the blends by adding
164 particles of HDPE and LDPE was also evaluated. Resilient characteristics of the specimens
165 were determined using Repeated Load Triaxial (RLT) tests. RLT test is meant to simulate the
166 pavement layer's condition under repeated traffic loads (AASHTO-T307-99 2007). Resilient
167 modulus (M_r) is the ratio of a repeated axial stress to the recoverable axial strain caused by the
168 repeated load. In RLT testing procedure, a haversine-shaped loading pulse with 0.1 s loading
169 period and 0.9 s resting period was applied (AASHTO-T307-99 2007). A triaxial cell was used
170 with the universal testing machine to carry out the RLT tests. A split compaction mold with a
171 diameter of 100 mm and height of 202 mm was used to prepare RLT specimens. Specimens
172 prepared with impact method were compacted in 8 layers, following the procedure described
173 in ASTM-D1557 (2012). A collar was used to ensure the aggregates remain inside the mold
174 while compacting the top layers. Materials were placed inside the mold carefully to avoid
175 segregation. During the tests, specimens were protected from moisture change by using a latex
176 membrane. A total of 60 data sets for M_r values was obtained from a range of repeated vertical
177 stress and static confinements in 15 sequences of RLT testing procedure. Two popular three-
178 parameter resilient modulus prediction models were selected to evaluate the data obtained from
179 laboratory tests. The two models used were Puppala et al. (1997) and AASHTO (2002). Though
180 there are many other methods available, these were selected since their input data was available
181 and these were suitable for granular material applications.

182 Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) test was carried out to determine stiffness
183 characteristics of the compacted specimens. UCS test is a popular testing procedure for
184 evaluation of pavement material. Since RLT testing is a nondestructive procedure, the same
185 specimens after completion of RLT testing were used for the UCS tests. In addition to
186 measuring UCS values, Young's modulus (E) and secant modulus (E_{50}) were determined from

187 the UCS tests. E is the ratio on the stress versus strain curve at the elastic zone where the strains
188 are recoverable. E_{50} is the slope of the line that is drawn from the origin to the stress at half of
189 the UCS peak value on the stress-strain curve. Lateral displacement was measured using three
190 lateral LVDTs mounted in the triaxial cell, forming 120° angles and pointing to the mid-height
191 of the specimen, to determine Poisson's ratio (ν). Poisson's ratio is defined as the ratio of lateral
192 strain to axial strain under axial loading in the elastic zone of the axial stress-axial strain curve
193 and specifies the extent to which a specimen can be compressed (Thom 2008). **Figure 2** shows
194 the specimens prepared for UCS and RLT tests using 3% and 5% of HDPE. The HDPE
195 particles are more visible in the specimen with 5% HDPE than in the 3% HDPE.

196 **Results and Discussion**

197 The stress-strain curves of the four blends obtained from UCS testing is illustrated in **Figure**
198 **3**. Evidently, an increase in the plastic content of the specimens results in a reduction of UCS
199 values. This can be attributed to the fact that plastic particles have smoother surfaces compared
200 with RCA particles, hence, more plastic granules result in less surface roughness, which tend
201 to result in subsequent higher stiffness (Cheung and Dawson 2002). **Figure 3** also shows that
202 blends of RCA/HDPE have higher UCS values. This may be related to the greater sphericity
203 of HDPE particles compared with that of LDPE particles.

204 Young's Modulus (E) and secant modulus at half of the UCS value (E_{50}) were obtained from
205 the graphs of **Figure 3**. These two important parameters used in geotechnical engineering and
206 pavement analyses. From the results of the lateral LVDTs, Poisson's ratio (ν) of the blends
207 were evaluated. Values of void ratio, E , E_{50} and ν are presented in **Table 3**. RCA/HDPE
208 specimens showed higher E , which means lower elastic displacement under the same stress
209 level, compared with RCA/LDPE specimens. Secant modulus and Poisson's ratio of the
210 RCA/HDPE blends are also found to have higher values. Poisson's ratios (ν) obtained for all

211 blends fall between the typical ranges of 0.15 to 0.35 specified for sand and gravel (Das 2008).
212 Results of Table 3 also show that increasing the plastic content results in decrease in the ν
213 values. Poisson's ratio is obtained from data corresponding to the elastic zone of stress-strain
214 curves of the blends (Figure 3). This zone for all blends of this research fell between stress
215 levels of approximately 50 kPa to 100 kPa. Low E values for blends with high plastic content
216 results in greater axial strain under the same stress as blends with low plastic content. Low ν
217 values in blends with low plastic content shows that the lateral strains do not correspondingly
218 increase. This can be attributed to low structure integrity of these blends due to high content of
219 particles with smooth surfaces (plastic particles).

220 **Figures 4 and 5** show the resilient modulus versus maximum axial stress graphs for
221 RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE blends, respectively. As illustrated in the graphs, a high confining
222 pressure results in a high resilient modulus. This can be explained by the fact that the high
223 confinement increases the aggregate interlocking, which results in low strains and accordingly
224 low M_r values. Thach Nguyen and Mohajerani (2016) explained the effect of confining
225 pressure through predictive resilient modulus models. **Figures 4 and 5** also indicate that under
226 the same confining pressure, increases in deviator (axial) stress which result in higher M_r
227 values. This can be attributed to greater stress hardening under greater deviatoric stresses
228 (Puppala et al. 2011). However, high deviatoric stress can also result in low M_r values (Thach
229 Nguyen and Mohajerani 2016) which is not the case in this research.

230 Aside from the effects of testing conditions (deviator and confining pressures), the RLT results
231 showed that in both RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE blends, the M_r values decreased by increasing
232 the plastic content. This, together with UCS values, is further illustrated in **Figure 6**. Values of
233 M_r presented in **Figure 6 (b)** are the average of resilient moduli obtained from 15 sequences
234 of the RLT test. **Figure 6** also compares the RCA/plastic results with typical UCS values
235 reported previously for RCA (Arulrajah et al. 2014) and recommended ranges of M_r values for

236 bases/subbases (AASHTO (1993). High roughness of aggregate surfaces is known to result in
237 greater resilient modulus (Barksdale and Itani 1989; Lekarp et al. 2000). As a result, replacing
238 more rough particles of RCA with rather smooth surfaced particles of HDPE or LDPE reduces
239 the resilient modulus. Also, blends of RCA/HDPE showed greater M_r values compared to the
240 other type of blends. This can be explained by observing the Young's moduli (E) presented in
241 **Table 3**. This modulus is in fact the slope of stress-strain curve at the elastic zone, where the
242 strains are recoverable. Under the same stress, a high E value means a low recoverable strain
243 and accordingly a high resilient modulus.

244 Two other factors that can cause high M_r values of RCA/HDPE compared with those of
245 RCA/LDPE are particle shape and particle roughness. In terms of particle roughness, Scanning
246 Electron Micrograph (SEM) was employed to characterize the particle surface. **Figure 7**
247 presents SEM images of HDPE and LDPE plastic granules indicating their smooth surfaces.
248 These are 1000X magnified micrographs of HDPE and LDPE. Clearly, there is no significant
249 difference in surface roughness of these two particles, which means that the surface roughness
250 is not the reason for different M_r values of the RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE specimens. On the
251 other hand, the close-up image of the two particles illustrated in **Figure 7**, shows that HDPE
252 particles generally have greater sphericity compared to LDPE particles. Low sphericity of
253 particles is known to degrade resilient properties of pavement layers (Nataatmadja and Tan
254 2001). Overall, M_r values of the four specimen types are within the expected M_r values for
255 typical quarry materials at 90% of OMC, which is 150 to 300 MPa (Arulrajah et al. 2013 b).

256 **Figure 8 (a)** presents the relationship between E and E_{50} moduli and **Figure 8 (b)** presents the
257 relationship between M_r and UCS values for the RCA/Plastics blends. The range between the
258 upper and lower envelopes of both plots is noticeably limited. The Young's Modulus of pure
259 RCA is 1.15 times of its secant modulus, and the resilient modulus (in MPa) is 0.58 times of

260 the UCS value (in kPa) of pure RCA. These are found to be close to the lower range of the
261 relationships presented in **Figure 8**.

262 The 60 data sets obtained from RLT testing procedure were evaluated through two predictive
263 resilient modulus models, suggested by Puppala et al. (1997), also known as octahedral stress
264 state model, and AASHTO (2002), also known as modified universal model. These models are
265 presented in Equations 1 and 2, respectively:

$$266 \quad M_r = p_a \left[k_1 \left(\frac{\sigma_3}{p_a} \right)^{k_2} \left(\frac{\sigma_d}{p_a} \right)^{k_3} \right] \quad (1)$$

$$267 \quad M_r = k_1 p_a \left(\frac{\sigma_b}{p_a} \right)^{k_2} \left(\frac{\tau_{\text{oct}}}{p_a} + 1 \right)^{k_3} \quad (2)$$

268 where σ_3 , σ_d and σ_b are respectively, confining, deviator and bulk stresses, p_a is atmospheric
269 pressure, τ_{oct} is octahedral shear stress, and k_1 to k_3 are model parameters.

270 **Figure 9** compares the predicted with measured resilient modulus using these predictive
271 models and also presents the model parameters obtained from regression analysis of the 60 data
272 sets undertaken in this research. Model parameters k_1 , k_2 and k_3 correspond to the Puppala et
273 al. (1997) model (Equation 1). k_1 and k_2 are positive since an increase in σ_3 and σ_d results in a
274 corresponding increase in M_r , as evident in **Figures 4** and **5**, while k_3 is positive since M_r is
275 always a positive value. k_1 and k_2 parameters corresponding to the modified universal model
276 (Equation 2) are also positive due to similar reasons. However, k_3 is negative of which an
277 increase in octahedral shear stress results in a corresponding decrease in the M_r value. This is
278 due to the fact that an increase in shear stress softens the specimen and results in a low resilient
279 modulus. Comparison between k parameters obtained from blends with and without plastic
280 shows an increase in k_2 and k_3 (absolute value of k_3 in AASHTO (2002) model) in both models
281 by introducing plastic particles to RCA. This indicates that sensitivity of the models to

282 confining stress, bulk stress, deviator stress and octahedral shear stress is increased by adding
283 plastic particles.

284 Three statistical measurements were used in order to evaluate the goodness of fit of test data in
285 the models. These include: standard accuracy (S_e/S_y), coefficient of determination (R^2), and
286 Root Mean Square Deviation (RMSD). In these measures, S_e is standard error of estimate and
287 S_y is the standard deviation (Azam et al. 2013; Witczak et al. 2002). For evaluation of accuracy
288 of fit, Witczak et al. (2002) criterion was used. In this criterion, $S_e/S_y \leq 0.35$ and $R^2 \geq 90$
289 represent “Excellent”, $0.36 \leq S_e/S_y \leq 0.55$ and $0.70 \leq R^2 \leq 0.89$ represent “Good”, $0.56 \leq S_e/S_y \leq$
290 0.75 and $0.40 \leq R^2 \leq 0.69$ represent “Fair”, and $0.76 \leq S_e/S_y \leq 0.90$ and $0.20 \leq R^2 \leq 0.39$ represent
291 “Poor” fit. Statistical measurements calculated and presented in **Figure 9** show that test data
292 show an “Excellent” fit for both of these models. This means that resilient behavior of these
293 blends can be evaluated or predicted through these established models, in spite of existence of
294 plastic granules in them.

295 **Conclusions**

296 In this research, two types of recycled waste materials, being RCA and with polyethylene
297 plastic blends (HDPE and LDPE) were evaluated for their stiffness and resilient characteristics.
298 Since the polyethylene plastics in this research were used in form of granules instead of
299 reinforcing fibers, slight degradation of RCA properties was observed. The following results
300 are obtained from the outcomes of this research:

- 301 1- Samples prepared by adding 3% and 5% LDPE or HDPE indicated CBR values
302 comparable to that of typical quarry materials, and these blends could be used in
303 base/subbase layers. Blends of RCA/HDPE showed a higher CBR values.
- 304 2- Specimens containing HDPE particles showed greater UCS values and higher Young’s
305 modulus compared with LDPE blends. SEM images showed there was no significant

306 difference in roughness of HDPE and LDPE particle surfaces, this could be attributed
307 to lower sphericity of LDPE particle compared with cylindrical shape of HDPE
308 particles. Generally, a greater plastic content results in lower stiffness parameters of
309 specimens, including E, E_{50} and ν values.

310 3- RCA/HDPE specimens presented higher resilient modulus, due to higher E values and
311 also, its cylindrical shape of HDPE particles. Similar to stiffness parameters, M_r values
312 of the specimens decreased by increasing the plastic content, due to further replacement
313 of rough-surfaced materials (RCA) with smooth-surfaced particles (HDPE/LDPE).

314 4- RLT test results showed that M_r values of all the 4 types of specimen fall within the
315 range of typical quarry materials. Moreover, the evaluation of the results using the
316 resilient modulus models showed that this percentage of plastic particles did not affect
317 the geotechnical nature of RCA. As a result, RCA/HDPE and RCA/LDPE blends can
318 be used in pavement bases/subbases.

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Table 1. Physical properties of RCA, HDPE and LDPE.

Material	G _s	D _{max} (mm)	D ₅₀ (mm)	Particle shape	Sphericity of particle
RCA	2.69	19.00	3.99	Bulky	-
HDPE	0.94	4.75	3.51	Bulky	1.05
LDPE	0.92	6.30	4.04	Bulky	0.86

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Table 2. Compaction and CBR test results on blends of RCA and RCA/plastic

Blend	MDD (Mg/m ³)	OMC (%)	CBR @ 2.54 mm penetration	CBR @ 5.08 mm penetration
Pure RCA	1.951	11.0	140-145	169-184
RCA97/HDPE3	1.866	12.1	108-114	148-158
RCA97/LDPE3	1.836	11.7	91-99	118-131
RCA95/HDPE5	1.854	13.1	94-106	137-146
RCA95/LDPE5	1.825	12.7	90-95	119-126

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Table 3. Stiffness properties of all blends

Blend	Pure RCA	RCA97/ HDPE3	RCA97/ LDPE3	RCA95/ HDPE5	RCA95/ LDPE5
Void ratio	0.39	0.41	0.43	0.42	0.41
E (MPa)	58.15	21.7	17.8	20.6	12.5
E ₅₀ (MPa)	50.43	18.6	11.9	17.3	9.8
ν	0.263	0.242	0.226	0.217	0.197

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Figure 1

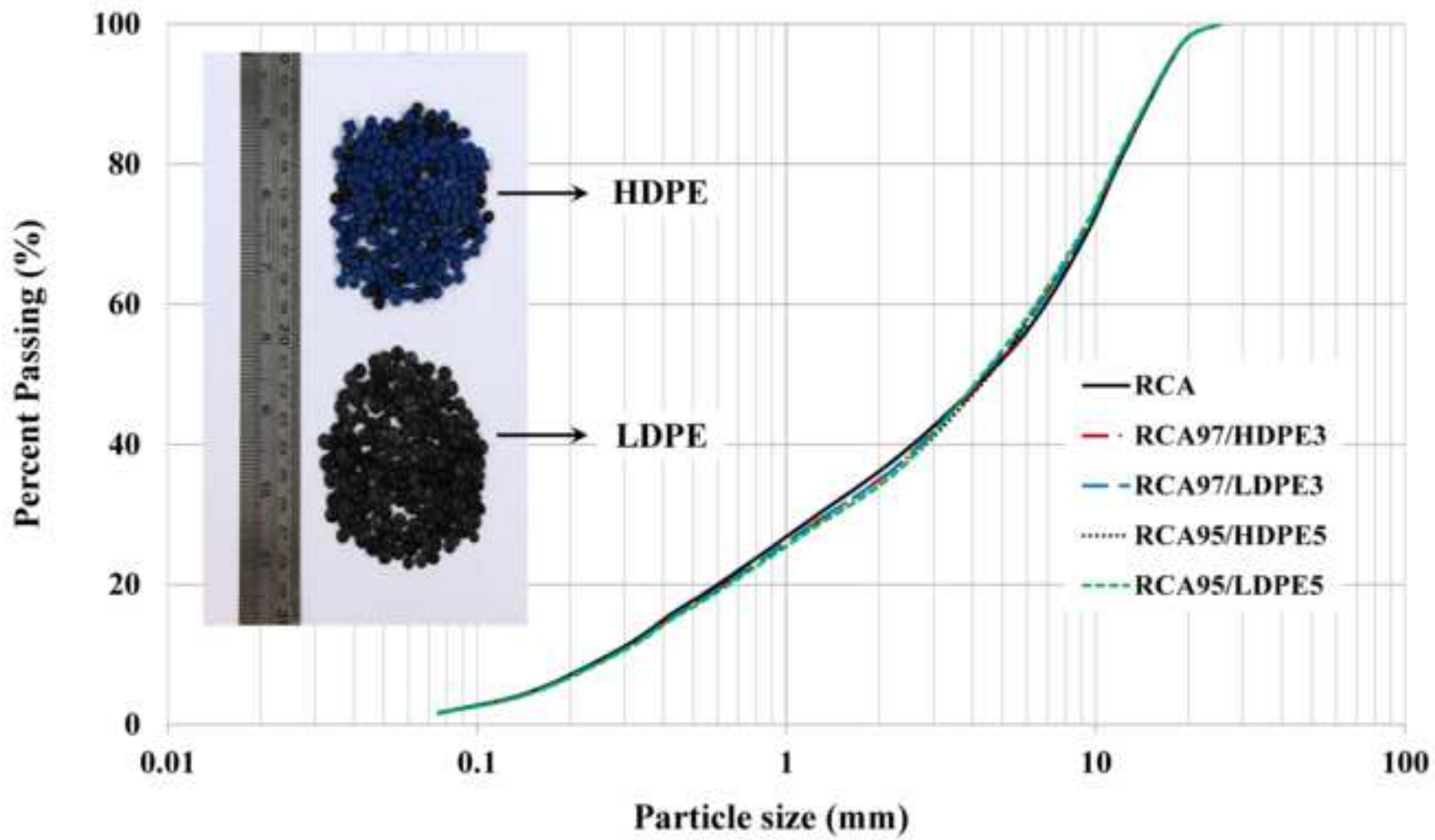


Figure 2

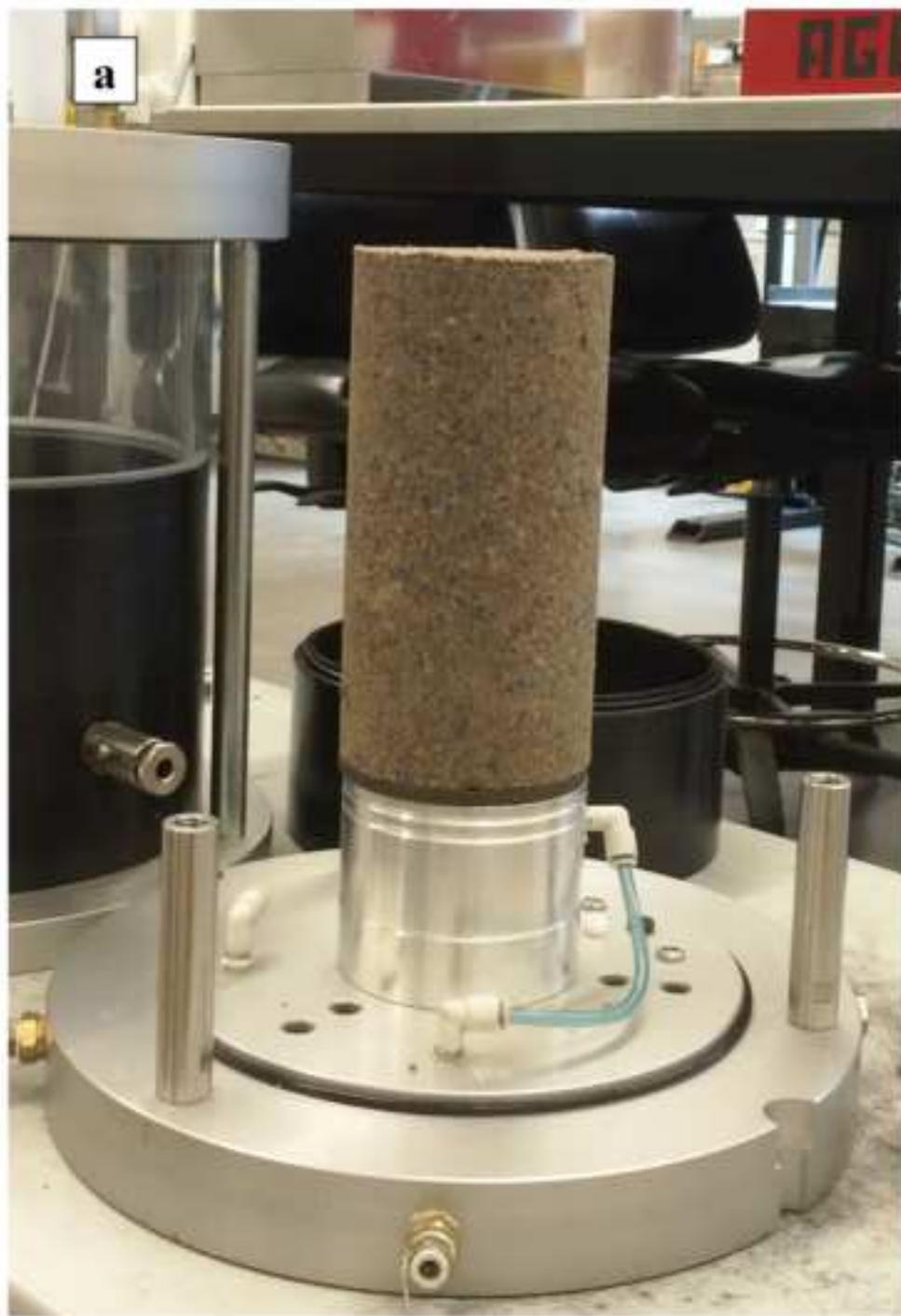
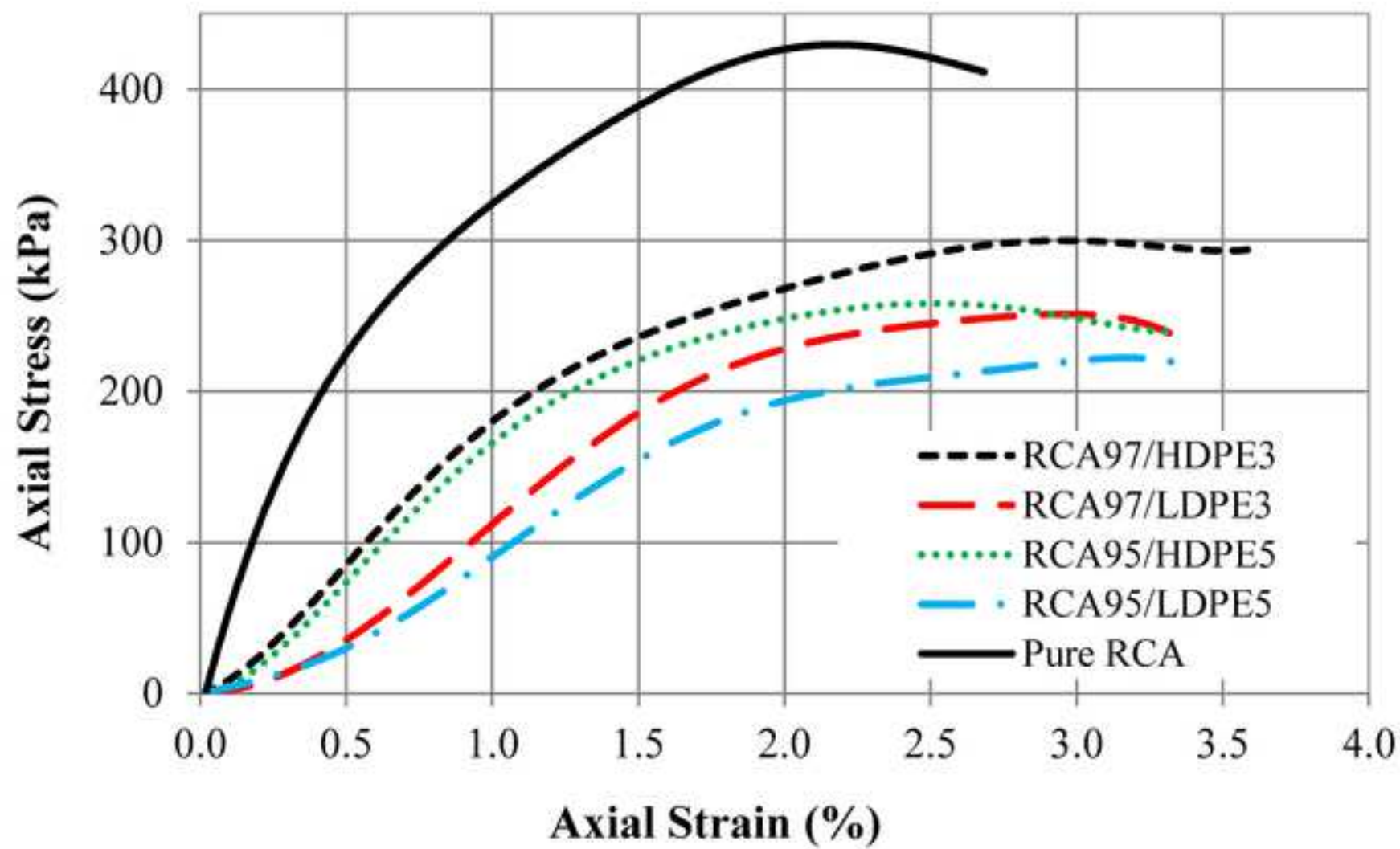


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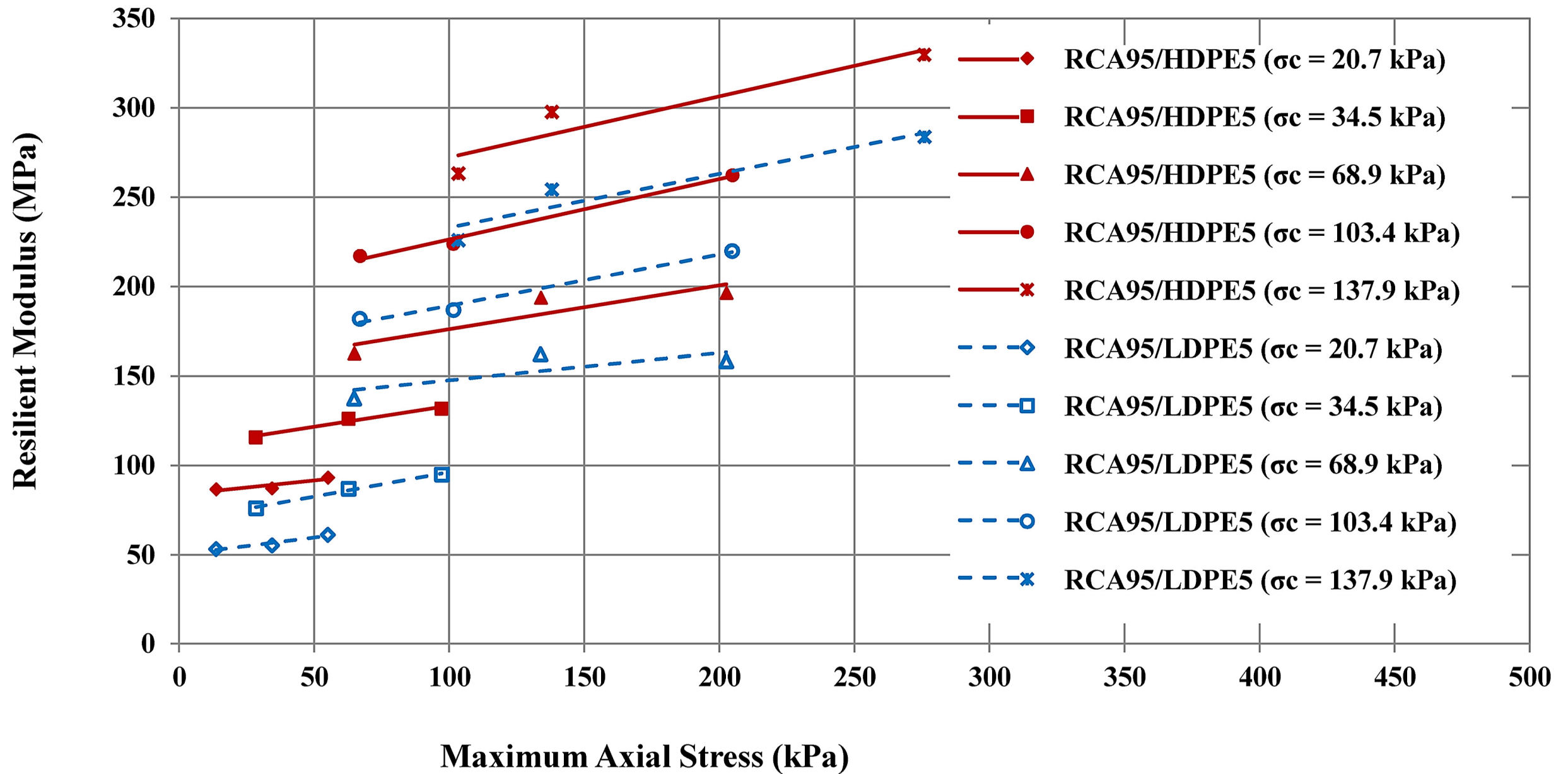
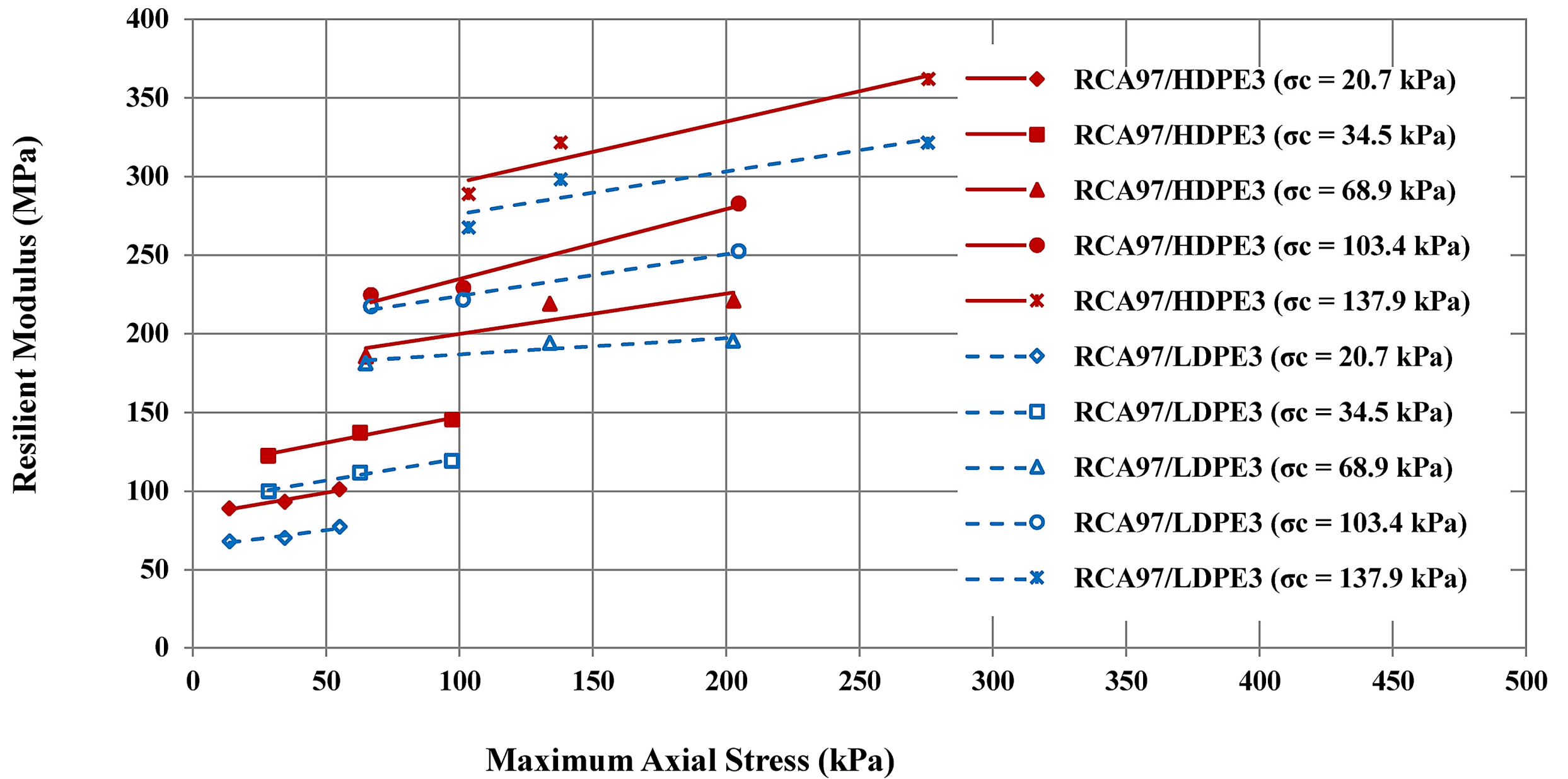


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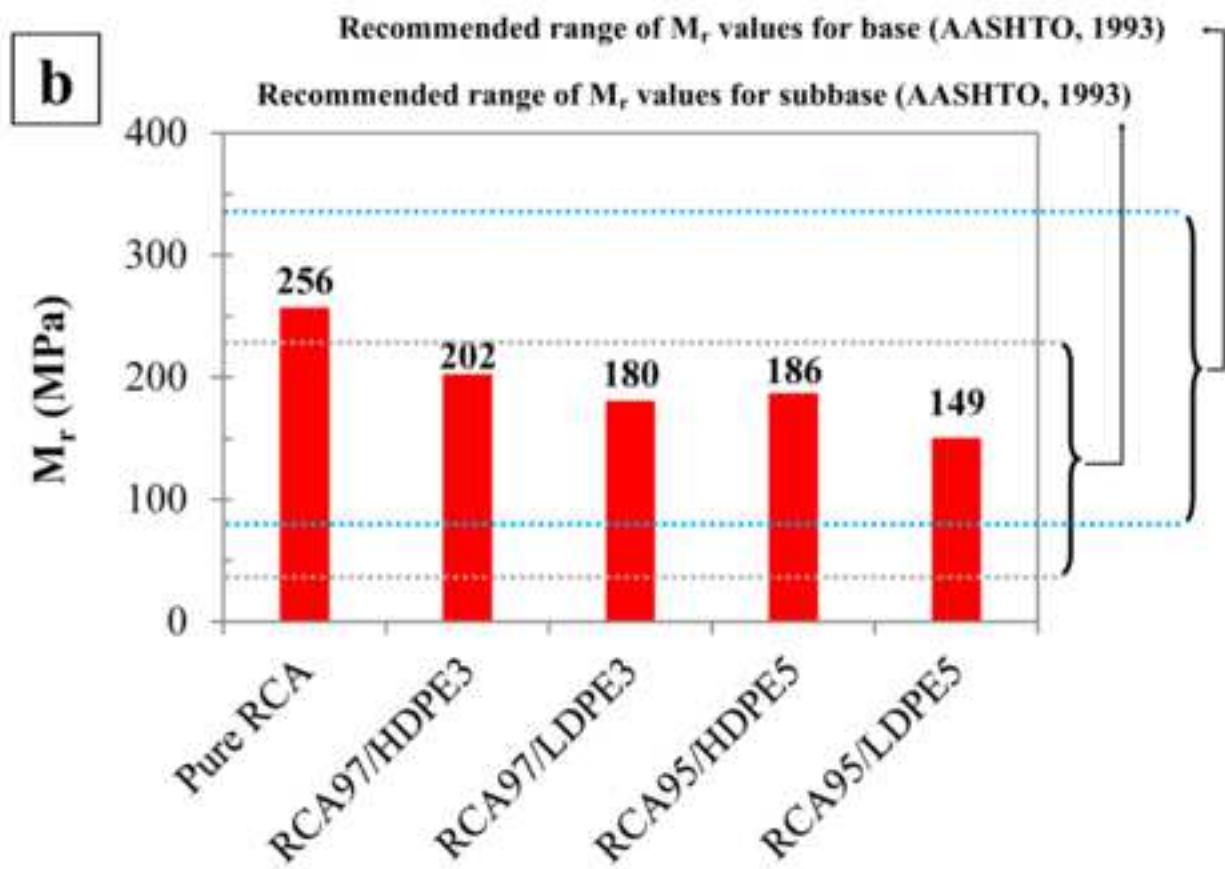
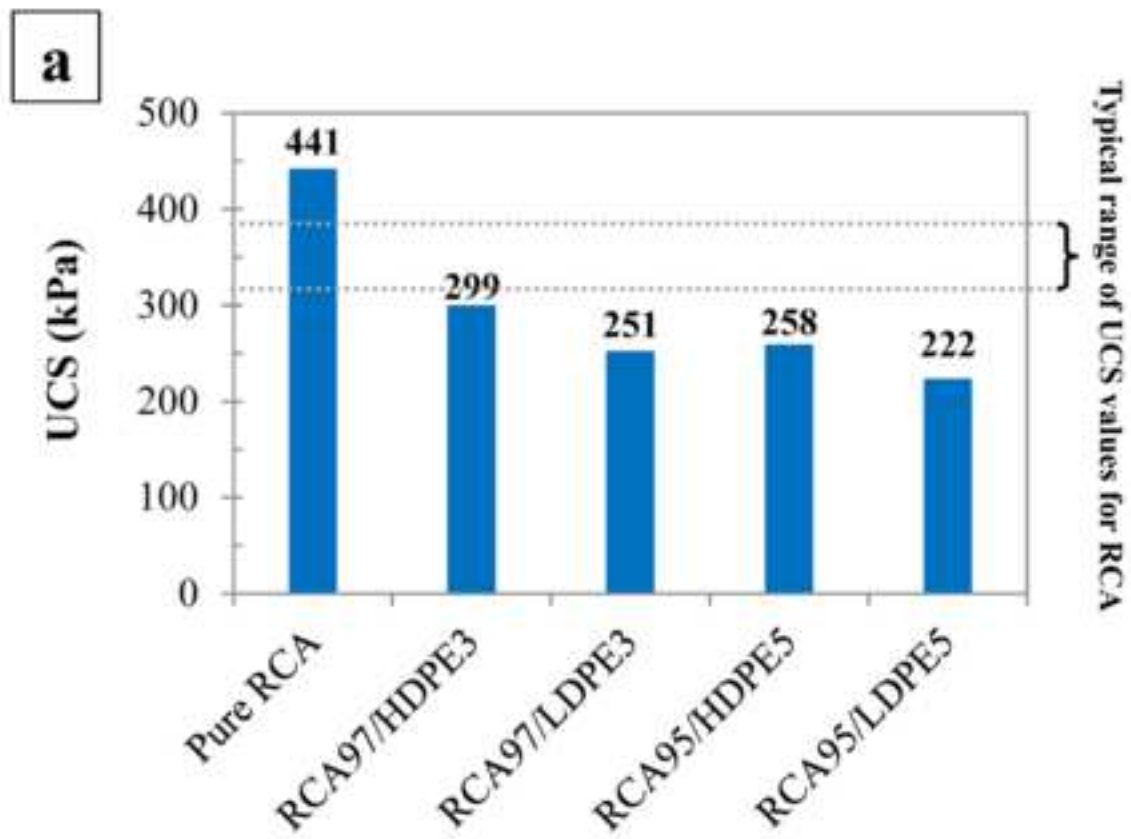


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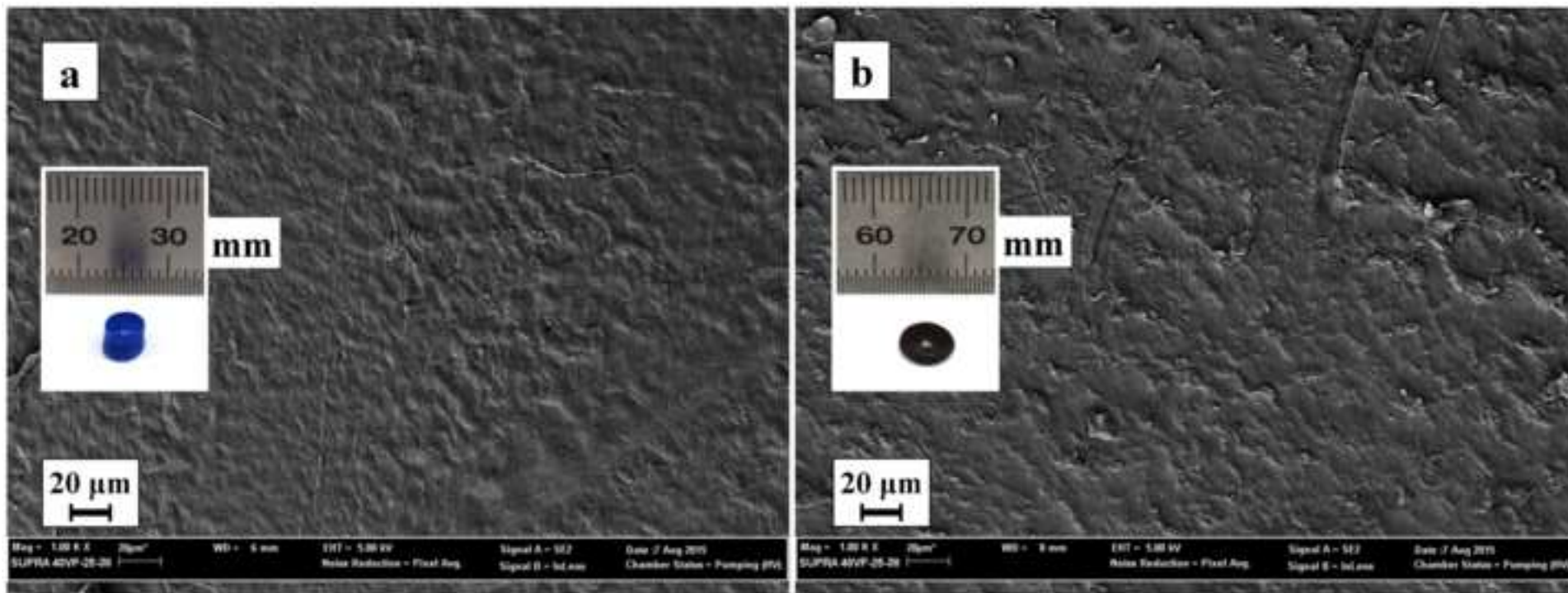


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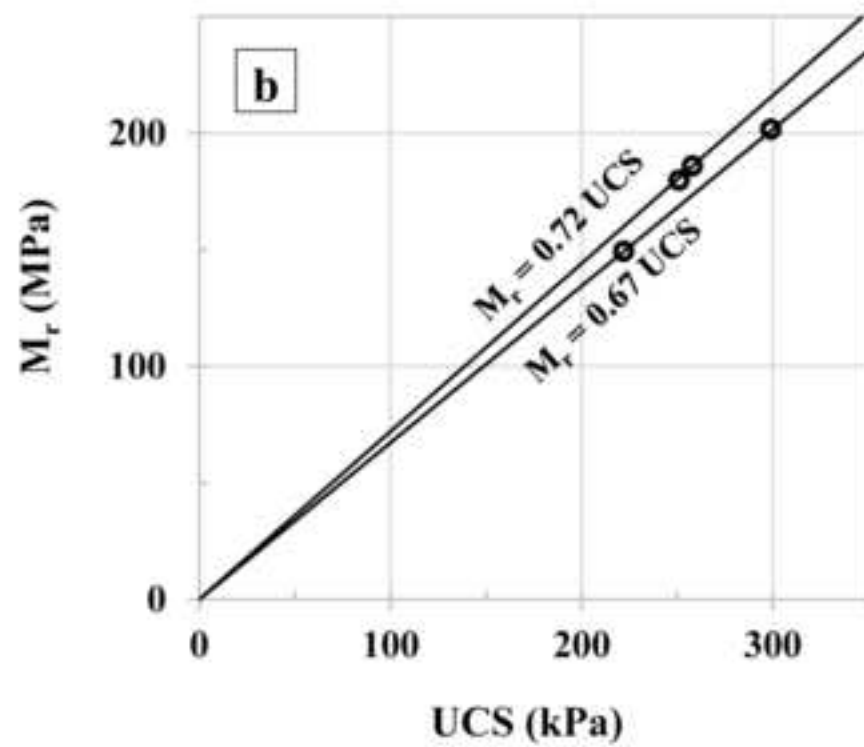
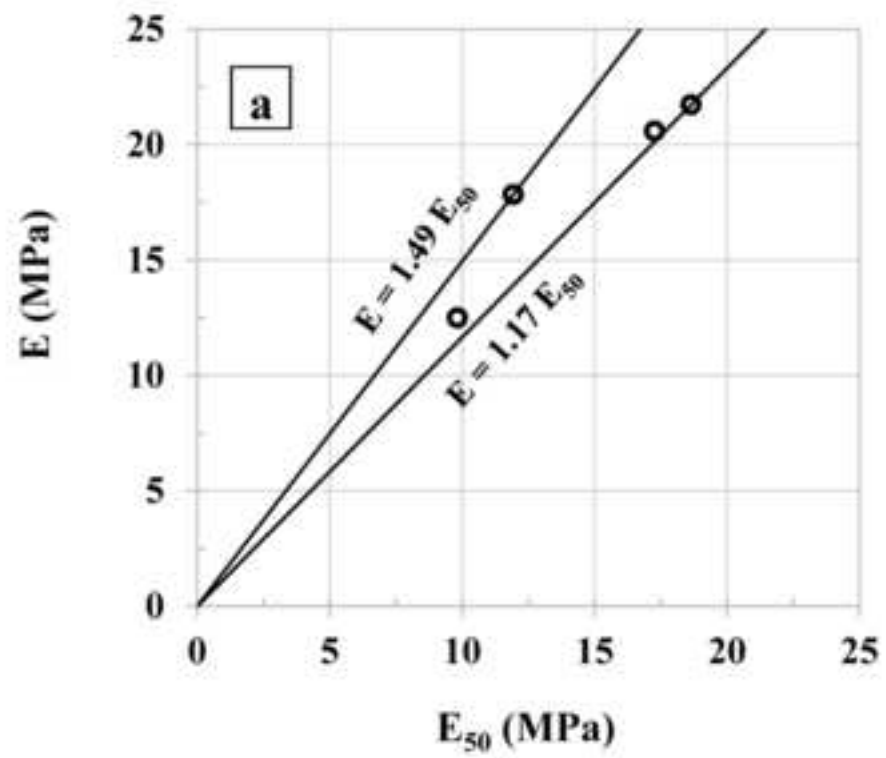


Figure 9

