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"I feel good with my teachers". The effects of positive teacher-student relationship on students' self-esteem and perceptions about their future.

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Article info

Abstract

School climate has long been recognized as a protective factor for the well-being of children and adolescents. Research has demonstrated that learning environments based on positive relationships among various social actors (students, teachers, and parents) are essential for improving students' global self-evaluations and fostering their positive adaptation. However, few studies have examined the role of teachers in these dimensions. To overcome this limitation in the literature, particularly in the Italian context, this study investigated the effect of the quality of the teacher-student relationship on students' self-esteem and perceived likelihood of future success and achievement of career goals. The study included a sample of 287 high school students. We tested a mediation model in which the quality of the teacher-student relationship was entered as an independent variable, students' self-esteem was entered as a mediating variable, and students' future expectations were entered as a dependent variable. The results indicated the presence of total mediation: positive teacher-student relationships were positively associated with students' self-esteem, which in turn had a positive association with students' future expectations. The study emphasizes that teachers' social-relational skills are a crucial aspect of their professionalism and are associated with the well-being of their students.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationships; self-esteem; future expectations; mediation model

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> *"Education Breeds Confidence.*
> *Confidence Breeds Hope.*
> *Hope Breeds Peace."*
> Confucius

Introduction

In psychological disciplines, particularly social psychology, the Self has always been a privileged object of study. The current theoretical formulations on the Self sprung from William James (1890) and George Herbert Mead (1934). The authors distinguished between the Self as an active and conscious subject – capable of acting and reflecting on the world and producing knowledge (Ego) – and the Self as an object of reflection, a product of the Ego and under its control (Me). According to James (1890), Me is a malleable entity that depends on the individual's material possessions and social connections. Additionally, it is the fundamental source of self-esteem. From Mead's perspective, on the other hand, the Self develops in social interactions. It reaches its peak when people can see themselves and their behavior from the point of view of the generalized other, i.e., society as a whole. According to Mead (1934), the Self has a social origin, and, in agreement with James (1980), it is modified and reconstructed during social interactions. In addition, the authors emphasized that self-awareness is developed not just through introspection and self-observation of one's behavior (e.g., Bem, 1972; Kihlstrom, 1987; Mor et al., 2010), but also, and perhaps most importantly, in social interactions.

The thinking of these authors has given rise to various theories aimed at understanding and explaining how people become self-aware and regulate their behavior (Theories of the Self: Baumeister, 1998) with the primary objective of defining causes, consequences, and functions of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This interest is motivated by the relevance of self-esteem and related constructs in various outcomes of personal and social life during all human existence (e.g., Livi et al., 2018; Orth et al., 2012 Theodorou et al., 2020). Indeed, research has shown that higher levels of self-esteem are predictors of success in various domains – for example, school, work, or psychological well-being (e.g., Chung et al., 2014; Morin et al., 2013; Orth & Robins, 2014; Orth et al., 2012; Preston & Rew, 2022; Steiger et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2014a; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). In contrast, lower levels of self-esteem appear to be related to mental health problems, substance abuse, and low life satisfaction (e.g., Diener & Diener, 2009; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; Sowislo & Orth, 2013; van Tuijl et al., 2014; Zeigler-Hill, 2011). In particular, self-esteem, similarity to other self-evaluation' sources (e.g., self-efficacy, self-image, academic self-concept), is essential during critical periods in individual development, such as late childhood and adolescence (Erikson, 1968), as it is involved in adjustment processes and academic success (e.g., Howard et al., 2021; Marsh & O'Mara, 2008; Morin et al., 2013; Trautwein et al., 2006; Virtanen et al., 2016).

Based on James and Mead's works, the thesis that self-esteem arises from the need to be accepted by others and to feel part of a social group was formally elaborated in the early 1990s by Mark R. Leary (1990). According to the author, «*self-esteem may be a reflection of the individual's assessment of the implications of his or her behavior for social inclusion and exclusion*» (Leary, 1990: 227). Developing these ideas, Baumeister and Leary, in 1995, presented the Sociometer Theory, according to which self-esteem is an indicator of one's relational value – the degree to which a person considers their relationship with other individuals as valuable or essential (Leary, 2001). Unlike famous approaches, this theoretical model argues that social relationships play a key role in shaping individuals' self-esteem (Leary, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2012; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). However, a recent meta-analysis has highlighted that these effects have not always been confirmed; the relationship between the nature and quality of social relationships and the development and maintenance of self-esteem, under certain conditions, takes on reciprocal effects (Harris & Orth, 2020).

Despite these mixed findings, research has shown that the influence of social relationships on self-esteem during childhood and adolescence is crucial. Indeed, the quality of the social relationships established in the early years of life strongly predicts children's self-esteem in adolescence and adulthood (Harris et al., 2017; Orth, 2018). At school age, pupils spend a significant amount of time within a variety of relationships (i.e., peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, teacher-parent relationships) (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Livi & Cecalupo, 2020; Zandvliet et al., 2014) that are essential for them to acquire information about themselves (Baumeister, 2019; Cecalupo et al., 2022; Eccles, 1999; Elliot et al., 2017; Marsh, 2007; Marsh & Seaton, 2013; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994) and to successfully adapt in school and non-school contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Marini et al., 2019, 2023; Wagner et al., 2014b; Wentzel, 1999, 2010).

Although scholars have placed great emphasis on the positive effects of peer relationships on the adaptation processes of young people, the role of the teacher is also decisive (e.g., du Mérac et al., 2022; Martin, 2013; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012; Wentzel, 2010; Wentzel & Miele, 2009). Theories and research in psychology and education have amply demonstrated that teaching quality is one of the most important predictors of student achievement (e.g., Chetty et al., 2014a; Chetty et al., 2014b; Jackson, 2018; Kraft, 2019; Pianta, 1999; Torsheim et al., 2000). Moreover, in recent years, in recognition of the multidimensional nature of teaching-learning processes (e.g., Blazar & Kraft, 2017), a number of research approaches have found that the practices adopted by teachers have an impact that extends beyond the cognitive outcomes attained by their students (e.g., Blazar & Kraft, 2017; OECD, 2021a, 2021b; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Several social-emotional outcomes, including students' academic beliefs, motivation, performance, and self-esteem, have been observed to be influenced by what students experience in school with their teachers (e.g., du Mérac et al., 2022; Elliot et al., 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; OECD, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Roorda et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2018; Wentzel, 1999). Specifically, it has been suggested that this social relationship provides students with helpful information not only about themselves, but also about what they need to successfully adapt to academic environments (Muijs et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wentzel, 1999; Zandvliet et

Fig. 1. The research model
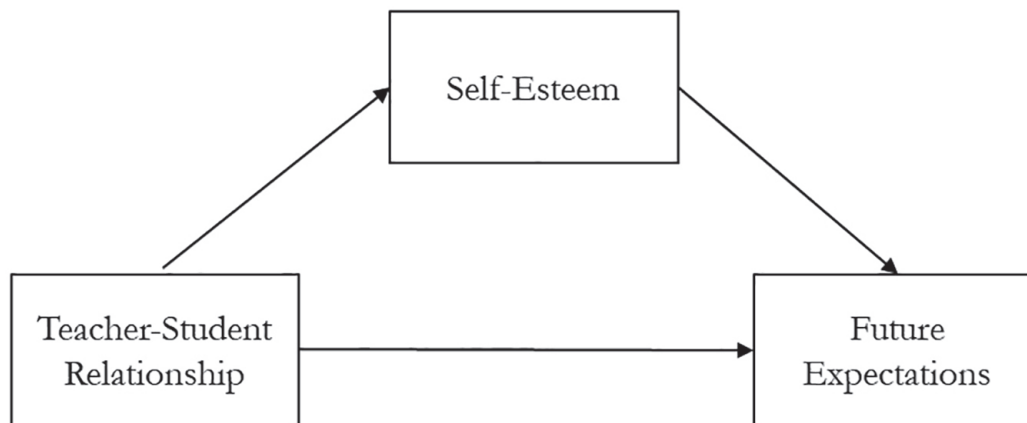
al., 2014). Based on this, the main objective of the modern educational system is to satisfy the intellectual, emotional, and relational needs of children and adolescents, offering them the possibility to express their individuality to the fullest (OECD, 2019). Attributing a decisive role to children's and adolescents' interactions with different socialization agents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), several works acknowledge that learning in a safe place, a source of support and stability, contributes to high school performance and improves well-being (OECD, 2021a; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wentzel, 2016). Theoretical models currently prevalent in the study of outcomes associated with the positive relationship between teachers and students qualify this dimension of school climate (Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Degol, 2016) as a contextual and social determinant of successful adaptation in children and adolescents (e.g., Wang et al., 2013; Wentzel, 2013, 2016). Over time, such theoretical models have allowed for an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of interpersonal contexts that are part of students' school experience, demonstrating that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is an essential protective and promotional factor for young people's adaptation processes (Masten, 2001).

Main objectives of the study and hypotheses

In light of the above, the present study investigates how the student's relational context, assessed through the quality of the relationship between teachers and students, can influence students' self-esteem and future expectations. Indeed, the study's main objective is to highlight the importance of this school climate dimension (cf. Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016) for the social-psychological adaptation of young people. As described in the introduction, the school microsystem is crucial for young people's cognitive and social development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and a positive school climate can foster all students' academic achievements and aspirations (Argentin & Pavolini, 2020; Berkowitz et al., 2016; OECD, 2018). However, although several studies have found an association between different dimensions of school climate and students' perceptions of their future (e.g., Lindstrom-Johnson et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016), most studies on students'

future aspirations and expectations have focused on the role of structural variables, such as socioeconomic status or ethnic background, neglecting the role of psychological and contextual factors (e.g., Agasisti et al., 2021; Boudon, 1974; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Minello, 2014).

In accordance with the Sociometer Theory, it was hypothesized that the perception of a positive relationship with one's teachers was positively related to students' self-esteem (Hypothesis 1) and future expectations (Hypothesis 2). Similarly, it was hypothesized that the self-esteem of students was positively related to their future expectations (Hypothesis 3). Furthermore, self-esteem was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between the perception of a positive relationship with teachers and students' future expectations (Hypothesis 4). Our research model is summarized as follows:

Methodology

Data collection and sample features

The study was conducted in the 2020-2021 school year and involved several classes of an Italian high school. According to the ethical standards of psychological research, before starting the study, written consent was obtained from the students' parents to allow them to participate. Participating students received a link to the questionnaire, which they filled out in the classroom using the available electronic devices. Before compiling, researchers reminded the students of what had already been specified in the informed consent concerning the study's objectives, methods, and aims (the project was approved by the ethical committee). In addition, students were informed of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study and were told that they could refuse to participate at any time. The research assistants then explained how to respond to the items using Likert scales and resolved all students' doubts during data collection. Despite the pandemic emergency and the widespread use of distance learning (UNESCO, 2020), students were physically in their classrooms during the administrations. The questionnaire was administered to 302 students, but only 291 completed all the measures required.

Before submitting the questionnaire, personal data concerning age and gender were collected. The average age was 16.29 years (*SD* = 1.71); this score was calculated for 287 participants because 4 students did not specify their age. About gender, 55% of the students stated that they were female (*N* = 160), 41.9% indicated that they were male (*N* = 122), and 3.1% identified themselves as "other" (*N* = 9).

Measures

After reading the instructions and providing information about their gender and age, the students completed the following measures.

Quality of the relationship between teachers and students. The quality of the teacher-student relationship was measured through 9 items (5-step Likert response scale) to which students responded by indicating the degree to which they perceived the presence of a positive relationship with their teachers in terms not only of emotional security and support (e.g., "*Between my teachers and me there is a strong bond*", "*In difficulties, I know I can count on my teachers*") but also of facilitation and help in achieving educational goals (e.g., "*My teachers encourage me in my studies*"). The items were developed by the researchers in collaboration with some teachers from the schools involved in the project. Some items were adapted from existing measures (e.g., Zullig et al., 2010, 2014); others were created from measures that are used to assess school climate understood as the set of positive relationships between students in the class group (Carron & Brawley, 2012). Assuming a one-factor factorial solution, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using the maximum likelihood method, to explore this hypothesis. The results of the CFA confirmed the one-factor structure of the measure and suggested a good model fit to the data (*CFI* = .93; *TLI* = .91; *RMSEA* = .09 [*90% CI*: .07, .11], *SRMR* = .05) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The reliability of the scale was satisfactory (α = .90).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured through the Italian version (Prezza et al., 1997) of Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). The scale was composed of 10 items that measure the person's degree of general self-esteem (e.g., "*Sometimes I feel useless*", "*I have a positive attitude towards myself*"). The scale showed adequate levels of reliability (α = .91).

Students' future expectations. Students' future expectations were assessed through two items on a 10-point Likert scale. In particular, the students' perceptions about the probability of future success ("*Do you think you will succeed in what you do in the future?*") and the degree to which the students felt able to achieve their career goals ("*To what extent do you think you will be able to achieve your work goals?*") were measured (see also Cecalupo et al., 2022). Based on the strong correlations between these two variables (*r* = .81, *p* <.001), a composite score was created from the sum of these two items.

Data analysis

The present study involved a cross-sectional research design. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics – 27 (IBM SPSS, 2021) for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to gather preliminary information about the sample. Subsequently, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to investigate gender differences in the examined variables. Zero-order bivariate correlation analyses were used to gather information on the relationships between the variables examined, taking demographic variables into account. Finally, a mediation model was conducted using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (version 3.5.3) to test the previously presented hypotheses. Specifically, in the mediation models (Figure 1), the quality of the relationship between teachers and students was entered as a predictor, students' self-esteem as a mediator, and students' future expectations were entered as dependent variables. Using 5000 bootstrap samples, confidence intervals for percentile bootstrap were determined and utilized to test the mediation indirect effect (Hayes, 2017).

Given the nature of the data examined, before proceeding with the analyses, it was assessed whether it was necessary to conduct the analyses through a multilevel design that took into account the nested nature of the data (with students nested into classes) (Kenny et al., 2002). Therefore, the intraclass correlation coefficient (*ICC*; e.g., McNeish & Stapleton, 2016) value was calculated for each outcome variable. The *ICC* values for all variables examined were below .10. Therefore, analyses were conducted by treating the data at the individual level: the *ICC* values indicated that a multilevel analysis would be of little benefit (cfr. Kenny et al., 2002; Heck et al., 2013).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables examined

Before proceeding with the analyses, we considered the preliminary treatment of the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Then, all variables considered in the study were standardized and correlations were assessed. Correlation analyses (Table 1) revealed significant and positive associations between the teacher-student relationship and students' self-esteem (*r* = .36, *p* < .001) as well as between the teacher-student relationship and students' future expectations (*r* = .13, *p* = .023). We also found a significant and positive correlation between students' self-esteem and their future expectations (*r* = .37, *p* < .001). Concerning demographic variables, the results showed that age had a significant and positive correlation only with the relationship between teachers and students (*r* = .20, *p* = < .001).

Tab. 1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

	M	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Teacher-Student Relationship	2.87	.82	-			
2. Self-esteem	3.30	.93	.36**	-		
3. Future expectations	7.31	1.78	.13*	.37**		
4. Age	16.29	1.71	.20**	.03	-.04	--

*Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01.*

To examine gender differences in the variables investigated, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. Due to the small sample size of students who self-identified as "other" gender ($N = 9$), only the differences in the mean scores of the variables considered (quality of the relationship between teachers and students, students' self-esteem, students' future expectations) between males ($N = 122$) and females ($N = 160$) have been analyzed. The results revealed the presence of statistically significant differences between the gender-defined groups (Female = 1, Male = 2) in the quality of the relationship between teachers and students ($F(1, 280) = 10.390$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .04$) and in students' self-esteem ($F(1, 280) = 31.750$, $p < .01$, $\eta p2 = .10$). In contrast, statistically significant differences between the gender-defined groups in the students' future expectations were not present, both for perceived future success ($F(1, 280) = .589$, $p = .444$) and future career goals ($F(1, 280) = .240$, $p = .625$). In particular, about the quality of the relationship between teachers and students, the mean scores were higher for males ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .83$) than for females ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .79$). Also, concerning self-esteem, the results showed that the mean scores were higher for males ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .83$) than for females ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .91$).

Using Model 4 of Hayes' macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2017), we conducted a mediation analysis to test our hypotheses and determine whether the quality of the relationship between teachers and students was associated with students' self-esteem and future expectations. In the model, the teacher-student relationship was entered as the independent variable, self-esteem as the mediating variable, and students' future expectations as the dependent variable. Age and gender were included as covariates. The results revealed that the direct association between the quality of the teacher-student relationship and students' future expectations was not significant ($B = -.01$; $SE = .06$; 95% CI [-.11, .13]; $p = .82$). Our second hypothesis was therefore not confirmed. On the other hand, in line with our fourth hypothesis, the indirect association between the quality of the teacher-student relationship and students' future expectations through self-esteem was significant and positive and showed a total mediation effect ($B = .12$; $SE = .03$; 95% CI [.07, .19]). In particular, in line with our first and third hypotheses, the results showed that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students has a significant and positive association with students' self-esteem ($B = .34$; $SE = .06$; 95% CI [.23, .45]; $p < .001$) and that, in turn, students' self-esteem has a significant and positive association with students' future expectations ($B = .36$; $SE = .06$; 95% CI [.24, .48]; $p < .001$). The model explained 14% of the variance ($F(4, 282) = 11.35$; $R^2 = .14$; $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study's primary objective was to provide an empirical contribution highlighting the importance of the nature of the relationship between teachers and students to students' self-esteem and their future expectations. In fact, the Sociometer Theory demonstrated that self-esteem, defined as a global estimation of one's own personal value (MacDonald & Leary, 2012), is primarily determined by the nature and quality of the social context in which people are embedded. Numerous school-based studies have found that positive relationships with teachers – key members of the microsystem into which students are embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; du Mérac et al., 2022) – are associated with a variety of psychological and social well-being indicators (Blazar & Kraft, 2017 ; Elliot et al., 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; OECD, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2018; Wentzel, 1999). However, few studies have examined the implications of this component of school climate on students' future expectations (e.g., Lindstrom-Johnson et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to expand the Italian literature in this field.

In the present cross-sectional study, we examined the associations between the quality of the teacher-student relationship, self-esteem, and future expectations among a sample of secondary school students. The results revealed that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is positively related to both students' self-esteem and their future expectations. Intriguingly, by testing a mediation model, we discovered that students' self-esteem fully mediates the association between teacher-student relationship and students' future expectations related to different aspects of their livesThis indicates that positive relationships with teachers, based on feelings of trust and respect and a source of academic and social support, are related to students' self-evaluation and, consequently, what they hope to accomplish in the future. These future expectations are crucial to success in a variety of spheres of life. Indeed, research indicates that students with optimistic future expectations make better use of their personal and social resources and are more likely to achieve their goals (e.g., Borgonovi & Pal, 2016; Nurmi, 2004; Beal & Crockett, 2010; Morgan, 2005; OECD, 2018; Perna, 2000). Consequently, the quality of the teacher-student relationship appears to play a crucial role not only during the school years but also in future life paths. In particular, for the purpose of evaluating the future expectations of students, we had taken into account two outcomes pertaining to both the general life domain and the professional field. This decision allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the associations between contextual (teacher-student relationship) and individual (self-esteem) variables and youth development trajectories.

The study's findings confirmed the Sociometer Theory's prediction that positive school environments can amplify the positive effects of high self-esteem. The most important conclusion that can be drawn from our research is that students' future expectations, which are frequently attributate to their demographic characteristics (such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity), can be enhanced by capitalizing on the social relationships they form at school. In spite of the numerous limitations described below, our findings highlight the necessity and urgency of developing intervention and research-action projects aimed at promoting the formation or strengthening of positive relationships between teachers and students. Several authors have observed that the significance of such relationships in pedagogical practices and teacher education programs has been largely disregarded (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014). This appears to be a significant limitation when one considers that

the positive teacher-student relationship also appears to play an important role in distance learning, particularly during online interactions (e.g., du Mérac et al., 2022; Sun et al ., 2022).

The present investigation shows some limitations that have to be taken into account. Firstly, the data have been collected at a single point in time. Cross-sectional studies do not allow assumptions to be made about the causal nature of the relationships between the variables considered (e.g., Maxwell et al., 2011; Mitchell & Maxwell, 2013); at most, they can help describe covariations between variables within causal relationships defined only at a theoretical level (Hayes, 2017). Therefore, it would be appropriate for future studies to overcome these limitations by paying closer attention to the covariates that can cause substantial changes in the examined models (Rohrer, 2018) and by employing longitudinal research designs. Secondly, the quality of the teacher-student relationship has been measured only from the students' perspective. One of the limitations of studies trying to understand the role of various dimensions of school climate on different psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes is the lack of multi-informant surveys (Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Degol, 2016). For future studies, it would be appropriate to also consider teachers' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with students. Thirdly, the validation of the scale used to assess the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is ongoing. In addition, the measure used to evaluate the quality of the teacher-student relationship only considers one dimension of the construct, and there has been insufficient attention to its multidimensional nature (Wentzel, 2013; 2016). Nevertheless, we believe that, for the purposes of the study and in accordance with the theoretical models considered, it was necessary to focus on the positive aspects of the teacher-student relationship in relation to the teacher's involvement in the student's life experience. Fourthly, the items used to evaluate students' future expectations were constructed ad hoc and only assessed two aspects of students' expectations regarding their future life and career goals. It would be appropriate to use scales validated in the study's target population for future studies. Lastly, in terms of sample characteristics, the students were recruited from a single school, which represents only a portion of the entire training offer of the Italian education system. Additionally, due to the nature of the study, it was not possible to determine in advance the sample size necessary to ensure statistical power of the analyses.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, our research provides a significant contribution to the knowledge of self-esteem's antecedents and consequences. Understanding how people represent and define themselves, especially during adolescence, is of the utmost importance for connecting the individual psychic world to social reality. Moreover, the results allow us to reflect on the role that school plays in a wide range of students' social-emotional outcomes and the significance of the teacher-student relationship during such a delicate period of development as adolescence (e.g., du Mérac et al., 2022; Pianta et al., 2012; Wentzel, 2010). In other words, teachers represent the "added value" of the school, and the development of their social-relational competencies, which are essential for fostering positive relationships with all students, is a crucial aspect of their professionalism (OECD, 2021a, 2021b).

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