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Research Paper

Dating and the Lens of Rejection Sensitivity: Unraveling the Impact on Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

Rejection sensitivity is one's prejudice in anticipating rejection which causes unpleasant social experiences and lowered emotional adjustments, while Self -esteem is the extent to which one's concept of self, according to their qualities seems to be positive. The current study investigates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem among Indian youth currently engaging in the dating market, using Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions as a framework. The study also examines gender differences in the relationship between the said variables. A sample of 358 college-going students aged 19-25 (178 males, 180 females) was surveyed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) and Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ). The results showed that the male participants showed a slightly higher rejection sensitivity than the female participants. In contrast, the female participants showed slightly higher self-esteem (mean = 17.8) than the male participants (mean = 17.2), resulting in a weak correlation between rejection sensitivity, gender, and self-esteem. However, since none of them were statistically significant, no conclusions could be made based on them.

Keywords: *Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Esteem, Young Adults, Indian context, Dating, Gender*

The human desire for love and affection drives the need to establish and maintain romantic companionship. Over the past decade, even technological advancements have improved the way singles have pursued companionship (Badal et al., 2018). Rejection sensitivity is often rooted in early life experiences, particularly in the context of attachment relationships, past instances of rejection, or social exclusion (Schaan et al., 2020). As the world grows more interconnected, scholars are starting to record how family dynamics are evolving in collectivistic nations like India which are experiencing fast economic growth. As people adjust their gender roles and attitudes towards romantic relationships to fit the demands of contemporary society, expectations of romantic partnerships are also changing because of these changes. However, not enough is known about how the younger generation of collectivist youth is developing in terms of their love tastes and practices. Because of the Indian values around dating (which also come from a collectivistic lens), gender norms and its societal issues, its diversity, and its ever-changing socio- economic environment, it becomes all the more necessary if not interesting to see

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how and if at all there is a difference the way rejection sensitivity impacts self-esteem between males and females. Various therapies could be tailored in response to the mental health bias and pre assumptions about each gender and uplift the wellbeing in this ever-changing society, post this understanding.

The relevance of this topic lies in understanding the socio-psychological affects contributing to the results of fluctuations in self-esteem and rejection sensitivity, which can then cater tailored interventions to address its impact on self-esteem in the common dating scenarios.

Gaining an understanding and looking at this topic from theoretical frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural theory is key to understanding the complex ways that rejection sensitivity in a setting can affect one's sense of self-esteem, differently between males and females. Earlier findings shed light on a relationship between poor self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and loneliness, which also tell us that low self-esteem may increase an individual's susceptibility to depression, which may be mediated in part by rejection sensitivity and loneliness. This highlights how these elements are interrelated in shaping one's sense of self-esteem.

Rejection Sensitivity and Self Esteem & Gender and Norms

It was found that there was a negative relationship between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity. Sarıçam et al. in his research, found that when rejection sensitivity increases, self- esteem declines. People who have poor self-esteem frequently take criticism personally, shy away from actions that could undermine their confidence, and consider how other people perceive them. (Set, 2019). with the help of the above evidence we can see how early life experiences, such as attachment bonds and previous experiences with rejection or social exclusion, can be the source of rejection sensitivity. This is important to understand how rejection sensitivity might seem in a dating setting or social experiences and affect people's self-esteem depending on their personal lived experiences. "Emotions are the universal language of the human experience; they are gender neutral. Men are prone to emotional suffering, heartbreak, and tragedy, just like women are. But social pressure has trained them to put on a stoic mask, giving the impression that they are untouchable. Men feel cut off from their feelings by this expectation. "It is essential to break free from these strict expectations to create an atmosphere that welcomes emotional expression and vulnerability for everyone". Because of cultural norms that discourage vulnerability, even among their loved ones, and link it with weakness, men are often skilled at hiding emotional suffering and carrying it in silence. Christie Saju, a counseling psychologist at Lissun, said in an interview with HT Lifestyle that there is a concerning gender difference in mental health. diagnoses and emotional expression and that this makes people more susceptible to depression. Furthermore, research suggests that men frequently experience greater emotional distress in the context of partnerships. Therefore, it is vital to allow male members of our society to overcome the constraints of generationally embedded traditional conventions and seek the support they might require. If emotional issues are not addressed, they can accumulate unresolved pain and cause significant anxiety and depression, which can have far-reaching effects on friendships, relationships, cognitive function, and other areas of life. (Shiraz, 2023).

Refusals, like saying "no," could be viewed as being overly severe, and voicing an open disagreement could be seen as aggressive or unfriendly. Indians therefore frequently deliver evasive rejections and subtly convey their disapproval. Indians can say "no" by using

expressions like "maybe" or "I'll do my best. "Occasionally, people will say nothing at all instead of giving a clear "no." (Indian Culture- Communication, 2018)

- **H1:** The impact of Rejection Sensitivity on Self Esteem is different between males and female.

The Indian Context

Dating is actively frowned upon In India, for which some possible explanations could be: The importance of virginity and the taboo of premarital sex, the apprehension of totally "westernizing" and losing one's culture, the worry about STIs or an unintended pregnancy, the worry that a romantic relationship would drive you to stray from your job or academic goals, the idea that having love or sexual relations should always be directed towards marriage and is pointless otherwise, that friends, family, and "society" as a whole will say if they discover that you are dating—basically, that you have failed as a parent by exposing your child to all the risks. Women are subject to this regulation more often than males. A concern that both older and younger generations have is "what society thinks." Indian parents, in my opinion, genuinely love and care about their kids' happiness. Their ignorance of what truly makes their kids happy is the more flawed step. They think that leading a life that is safe, obedient, and approved by "society" is the key to happiness. We desire the freedom to develop, discover, and express who we are because we know that living a life that is authentic to who we are will make us happy—and yes, we change all the time. And one important area where we develop, learn, and express who we are is in dating. We need to have more open discussions with our parents, ones that probe the deeper philosophical divisions and bring them to light so we can decide if this is the life we want to lead. These discussions should also challenge our love for one another and hopefully make it stronger than our concern for Auntie's opinion. This post is dedicated to all the girls out there who have been pushing the boundaries and fighting the good fight; you are exhausted but you are winning, keep it up. I believe it is, and that we have made and will continue to make even more progress. (Aparna, 2020).

It is commonly observed that families in collectivist societies like India are defined by a strong sense of interdependence on one another as well as respect for parental authority. In both investigations, it was discovered that collectivism was linked to a higher tolerance for parental control over mate preference, which decreased relationship commitment; however, collectivism was also linked to stronger family ties—a phenomenon known as family phallocentrism—which increased commitment. The rules and practices that are pre-eminent in a person's social environment affect and direct their attitudes and behaviors (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). People's self-definition, interpersonal relationships, and interactions with their social surroundings are influenced by cultural values, particularly individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995). The norms, traditions, and responsibilities established by the in-group control social behavior (Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). As a result, adhering to traditional norms is highly valued, and those who do otherwise run the danger of receiving negative feedback from others in the community. Similarly, collectivists typically respect social order and elder authority to maintain group homogeneity and maintain the structural integrity of the group, even if it means compromising one's freedom of choice (Nath & Craig, 1999).

- **H2:** There is a significant relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem in the Indian context of dating.

According to Socioemotional Selectivity theory, people prioritize emotionally significant relationships over other social encounters as they become older and become more selective. People who are dating may be more sensitive to rejection since they are looking for deeper connections and are more afraid of being rejected. In summary, this study is based on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions which says that cultural values influence behavior and is aimed at the young adult population of India. Gaining knowledge about how the variables in India influence one's self esteem, would be a good addition for Indian Literature too while also exploring how rejection sensitivity appears.

Understanding the impact of rejection sensitivity on self-worth within the Indian dating culture holds significant importance due to its implications for mental health, relationship dynamics, cultural relevance, intervention strategies, awareness as well as policy making. Rejection sensitivity has been associated with many mental-health outcomes such as depression, low self- esteem, and anxiety. Based on the literature, in the Indian cultural context, where dating is usually frowned upon and talking about one's emotional experiences isn't very common, individuals may be particularly susceptible to these negative consequences. By looking into how rejection sensitivity influences self-esteem in dating wherein participants also are influenced by the Indian culture, we can gain insights into the psychological well- being of individuals navigating romantic relationships in this cultural context.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedures

This study used a purposive sampling method to select university going participants in India. Online questionnaires were used to collect the data. Participants in the study were between the ages of 19 and 25, speak only English, have first-hand experience of romantic relationships, dating, hookup culture, and the experience of being rejected by potential partners through dating apps, the internet or in person. Participants or their households identified with Indian cultural norms and traditions. Additionally, all participants had provided informed consent to participate in the study. Those who had just ended a long-term relationship, those who actively discussed dating with their parents or homes, those who were 18 years of age or younger, and those who were 26 years of age or older were not included in the study.

The data was collected both online: through google forms and offline: in person, distributing the forms to those who fit in the inclusion criteria. The google form included details: that of the study and also stated that the participants' identities will be kept anonymous and they can withdraw their participation any time, in the informed consent form.

A total data of 400 was proposed to be collected, which was, but out of which 358 was valid based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria wherein careless responses, half-filled questionnaires and ones that did not fit the inclusion criteria were excluded. Among these a total of 178 were male and 180 were female respondents

Measure

1. **Rosenberg's Self-esteem Questionnaire:** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale presented high ratings in reliability areas; internal consistency was 0.77, minimum Coefficient of Reproducibility was at least 0.90 (M. Rosenberg, 1965, and personal communication, April 22, 1987). The purpose of the 10-item RSE scale is to measure self-esteem. Originally the measure was designed to measure the self-esteem of high school students.

However, since its development, the scale has been used with a variety of groups including adults, with norms available for many of those groups. Scoring: As the RSE is a Guttman scale, scoring can be a little complicated. Scoring involves a method of combined ratings. Low self-esteem responses are "disagree" or "strongly disagree" on items 1, 3, 4, 7, and 10, and "strongly agree" or "agree" on items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9. Two or three out of three correct responses to items 3, 7, and 9 are scored as one item. One or two out of two correct responses for items 4 and 5 are considered as a single item; items 1,8, and 10 are scored as individual items; and combined correct responses (one or two out of two) to items 2 and 6 are considered to be a single item. The scale can also be scored by totaling the individual 4-point items after reverse- scoring the negatively worded items. Reliability: The RSE demonstrates a Guttman scale coefficient of reproducibility of .92, indicating excellent internal consistency. Test-retest reliability over a period of 2 weeks reveals correlations of .85 and .88, indicating excellent stability. Validity: Demonstrates concurrent, predictive, and construct validity using known groups. The RSE correlates significantly with other measures of self-esteem, including the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. In addition, the RSE correlates in the predicted direction with measures of depression and anxiety.

2. **Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire:** The RS-Adult questionnaire (A-RSQ; Berenson et al., 2009) is an adaptation of the RSQ (Downey & Feldman, 1996) for assessing RS in adult research participants." As reported in Berenson, Downey, Rafaeli, Coifman & Paquin (2011), 85 adults completed the A-RSQ twice, an average of 6.9 weeks apart: · Internal consistency (alpha) = .89 (for each administration)· Test-retest reliability (Spearman-Brown coefficient) = .91· Reference: Berenson, Downey, Rafaeli, Coifman & Paquin (2011). The rejection-rage contingency in borderline personality disorder. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 120, 681-690. How to interpret A-RSQ scores: It is best to keep personality scales continuous in research, rather than divide people into high versus low categories based on arbitrary cutoffs. But if you need to create categories, you can do so using the descriptive statistics (mean and SD, or percentiles) for your sample, or similar samples from previous research. Typically, +1/-1 SD around the mean defines the cutoffs for high and low, respectively. You can also use +.5/-.5 SDs to define cutoffs for moderately high/low, if you would like. +2/-2 SDs can optionally define cutoffs for very high/low. For example, in the research we did to develop this measure (as reported in Berenson et al., 2009

Data Analysis

This study used JAMOVI to conduct descriptive statistics and correlation analysis on the data; using JAMOVI to verify the validity of the scales used on the data. Further a regression analysis using JAMOVI was done as well.

Ethical Consideration

Before choosing to be a part of this research study, all the participants had been briefed about the study, its purpose, and method, and their informed consent was taken as well. It was made sure that all the participants' identifying information (name) was kept confidential and coded and no unnecessary information except for that of the study was asked for. The participants were made aware of their autonomy- to opt of whenever they wished to without any consequences. Since this study also focuses of assessing rejection sensitivity and self-esteem in the Indian context, close attention was paid to making sure that no question in the demographic information or the questionnaires was dishonoring cultural norms or beliefs in any way. In no way were any questions stigmatizing or putting any culture down.

RESULTS

Common Method Bias

This study used Harman's single factor test for possible common method biases. Exploratory factor analysis using JAMOVI was conducted on all questions of both the scales and it was found that the first factor only explains 6.98% of the total variance of the data. Therefore, since the value is significantly less than 50% threshold, there doesn't seem to be any substantial concern from common method bias in this study. The low % says that the variance in the data used for this study is spread across multiple factors and not just guided by any one single factor; this also says that the method of data collection has not overly influenced the responses considered.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables

In Table the descriptive statistics show that in the data collected, males, coded 1 have a higher rejection sensitivity (mean= 9.64) than females, coded 2, (mean= 8.95). The ranger in this sample indicates a broader spectrum of rejection sensitivity among males than in females since the range of rejection sensitivity is (2.20 to 27.1) for males and (1.60 to 17.9) for females. We can see that the data is not normally distributed – rejection sensitivity scores for males (W=0.937, p < 0.001) and females (W=0.982, p= 0.019), this also tells that deviation from normality is more prominent for males (1). Females, coded (2) have a slightly higher self-esteem (mean= 17.8) than males, coded (1) (mean =17.2). The range of self-esteem is more broad for females. The data is again, not normally distributed male (W=0.968. p< 0.001) female (W= 0.977. p = 0,005), this also indicates that the self-esteem scores for both genders are similarly skewed.

Table 1 Descriptive

	Gender	Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire	Rosenberg Self Esteem Questionnaire
Mean	1	9.64	17.2
	2	8.95	17.8
Median	1	9.53	17.0
	2	8.90	18.0
Standard Deviation	1	3.27	3.36
	2	3.16	3.09
Range	1	24.9	15
	2	16.3	18
Shapiro-Wilk W	1	0.937	0.968
	2	0.982	0.977
Shapiro Wilk p	1	< .001	< .001
	2	0.019	0.005

There is a very slight positive connection (Spearman's rho = 0.045) between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem. There isn't, however, compelling evidence in the sample of a relevant association between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem, as this correlation is not statistically significant (p = 0.306).

Gender and ARSQ: With a weak negative association between gender and rejection sensitivity (Spearman's rho = -0.094), it is possible that males and females have somewhat different levels of rejection sensitivity. This correlation is not statistically significant, though, as the p-value of 0.075 is slightly above the usual significance level of 0.05. There is not enough data to draw the conclusion that gender affects rejection sensitivity in a

significant way. The connection between gender and self-esteem is weakly positive (Spearman's rho = 0.097), suggesting that gender may have a little impact on self-esteem. But because it is similarly above the 0.05 cutoff, the p-value of 0.068 indicates that this link is also not statistically significant.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

Correlation Matrix

		Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire	Rosenberg Self Esteem Questionnaire
Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire	Spearman's rho	-	
	p-value	-	
Rosenberg Self Esteem Questionnaire	Spearman's rho	0.045	-
	p-value	0.306	-

DISCUSSION

In the context of Indian dating culture, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem, with a particular focus on gender disparities. There is no apparent connection between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem, according to data gathered from 358 Indian college students, ages 19 to 25. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant difference between the genders even though women had somewhat better self- esteem and men had slightly higher rejection sensitivity. The purpose of this conversation is to investigate potential explanations for these results, especially considering India's distinct sociocultural background.

A Worldwide View on Rejection Sensitivity and Self-Esteem

"Rejection sensitivity is a bias toward expecting rejection that can result from negative social experiences and degrade emotional adjustment" (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). It has been researched in regard to romantic relationships and frequently connected to low self-esteem- in the West. People's overall assessment of their value, or self-esteem, is often influenced by how they believe other people feel about them. Theoretically, those who are very sensitive to rejection are more likely to experience feelings of inadequacy and undervaluation, which might lower their self- esteem.

However, this study's results do not show a statistically significant relationship between the sampled Indian Young adults' self-esteem and how sensitive they are to rejection. These results differ from the literature gathered (majorly from the West) wherein it had been observed that higher the sensitivity to rejection, the lower the self-esteem would go if one is rejected, resulting in poor mental health.

There could be various reasons why this was not observed in the current study, particularly considering the distinct sociocultural context of India.

The Indian Setting for Dating and Being Sensitive to Rejection

In India, because of the generationally passed down norms, there remains a cultural hesitation surrounding dating and romantic relationships, particularly with regard to younger

people. India is a collectivist society where social reputation, family expectations, and collective peace are valued more highly than personal preferences. This has the potential to significantly influence how young people view love relationships and handle rejection. Emotional control and self- control are highly valued, particularly among men, whereas, expression of emotion, especially vulnerability, is typically frowned upon, typically in males, who may see it as a sign of weakness (powered by the society at large). In our society, males are expected to keep a strong exterior and to repress their feelings of rejection. This could be the reason why the study's male participants showed somewhat increased rejection sensitivity, even if it did not appear to significantly affect their self-esteem. One could say that men in this study may have experience rejection, but they might not have internalized it to the extent that it diminishes their sense of value.

Women and Growing Self-Esteem

Given the ever-changing state of gender norms in India, it is not surprising that women displayed somewhat greater levels of self-esteem than males in this sample. Indian women are increasingly defying gender norms as they pursue education, employment, and personal autonomy—especially in urban areas. Since women empowerment is also almost always on the rise, it could be one reason to which the greater levels of self-esteem among the female participants may be attributed. Many young women may be growing more confident in themselves despite the stigma and social pressure associated with dating before marriage, especially in settings that support personal development and gender equality- colleges and urban cities.

Stigma Associated with Dating and Emotional Expression

There is still a taboo with regards to dating, in an Indian household which is why it is also possible that many not a lot of the Indian youth has had the same opportunities as their peers in Western nations to explore relationships as freely and frequently and face rejection. Therefore, rejection in a romantic setting might not be as frequent or significant in influencing one's self- esteem. However, youngsters could experience social pressure to keep their romantic or emotional setbacks bottled up, which is when one would also wonder to what extent and whether or not this would be the cause of emotional turmoil in future relationships.

Emotional Vulnerability and Gender

This study's weak negative association between gender and rejection sensitivity is still an interesting finding; the statistics indicate that men might be a little more sensitive to rejection than women, (even though the results aren't statistically significant), this could be explained by the traditional expectation that men should initiate romantic relationships, even though Indian men are socially conditioned to repress emotional sensitivity. This could make them psychologically more vulnerable to rejection when combined with the generationally passed down patriarchal history.

Men are under more strain because rejection might make them feel as though they didn't live up to these standards. Their greater sensitivity to rejection, however, had no discernible effect on their self-esteem; this is probably because their culture places a strong focus on stoicism and emotional fortitude, blocking out any place of reflecting on how one is truly feeling, which could again leave one wondering about the long-term results of the same. Comparatively, women in this study showed a higher self-esteem, this may reflect the larger and more current shifts in gender roles in Indian society which are also breaking paths of the generationally passed down traditional roles as women are becoming more self-assured and

independent. It's possible that many young women are discovering affirmation and self-worth— rather than romantic relationships—through their education, professional accomplishments, and the progressive movement towards gender equality, (despite the stigma associated with dating). One possible explanation to a lack of a significant association between women's self-esteem and their sensitivity to rejection may indicate that women are growing more resilient to social pressures and expectations in the context of partnerships.

Methodological Issues

Sample Characteristics: The study concentrated on college-going students, who might be more progressive and liberal than the Indian populace. A more urban, educated, and maybe Westernized group may have been represented in the sample due to the exclusion of participants who were not fluent in English. These people might view dating, rejection, and self-worth differently than people from more conventional backgrounds.

Although they were created in Western contexts, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire are standardized assessments. Even with their credibility and worldwide use, these scales might not correctly be able to convey the delicacies of Indian culture's rejection sensitivity and sense of self-esteem.

In collectivist cultures, one's social standing and collective peace might just have a greater influence on their self-esteem than their personal judgements of value would.

Cultural Adaptations: Possible cultural variations in the way rejection sensitivity appears in Indian dating culture were not taken into consideration by the study. For example, as was previously said, rejection in Indian culture is frequently more subtle or indirect than it is in Western contexts. This may make determining the precise effect of rejection on self-esteem more difficult.

LIMITATION AND IMPLICATION

The population considered for this study was students from urban areas who may be more progressive compared to the rest of the Indian population, thus limiting generalizability to a broader population in India itself. The sample also was limited to people who spoke in English, automatically excluding those of lower or socio-economic background who also might be facing the same, differently. Both the scales chosen for this study were developed in the West and more suited for their context, hence, they might have not been able to fully capture the subtleties of a collectivistic society like India, wherein the self-esteem maybe more influenced by familial expectations than personal feelings or rejection. With a focus only on the gender binary, this study also missed out on the different experiences the non-binary, or gender conforming population might have had. Looking at literature, one can say that enough studies on the said variables have been done in the West, while this study emphasizes the importance of considering cultural contexts in psychological research, in the non- western countries.

Further studies could look at the lived experiences of individuals in collectivistic cultures like India, and what role it plays in shaping one's sensitivity to rejection and self- esteem. male participants having higher levels of rejection sensitivity could also be due to the generationally passed done societal norms like stoicism and repression of emotions.

There's a need for interventions for men in India to also to look into tapping into their emotional processes so as to avoid the long terms effects of suppressing their emotions, on their well-being. Although women participants show a higher self-esteem and this could be because of the ever-changing society, and the urban women's increase in the same because of their personal achievement. However, there's also a need to explore more from the more culturally conservative rural areas because their experiences might differ as well.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem among young adults aged 19 to 25 years of (university going), while also taking gender into consideration. On one hand where the male participants showed a slightly higher sensitivity to rejection, the female participants showed a comparatively higher self-esteem, however, these differences were not statistically significant to conclude a strong positive or negative correlation. The results from this study, contradicts earlier findings, majorly from western literature stating a negative significant relationship between the two variables.

Taking into consideration the context of this study- India, which is rich in collectivistic values, and has certain norms around dating, and is heavily governed by the generational but also evolving gender roles, might have a lot to do with the said results. One could say that in a collectivistic society, where reputation of the family and one's emotional control are important, rejection may not affect one's self esteem as much as it might in more individualistic cultures. This study also highlights the need for further research in this area backed by cultural considerations to see how rejection sensitivity manifests in one's self esteem in the Indian contexts. Further studies could also consider exploring cultural adaptations to better grasp these complex Indian contextual dynamics.

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Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be provided by the author when necessary, without any reservations.

Author Contribution

GT contributed to the conception and the study design, collected data and organized the data base performed statistical analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Dr. Mitali Jha reviewed it critically and suggested revisions. This was a collaborative effort.

Conflict of Interest

There were no financial or commercial ties that would raise the possibility of a conflict of interest when the research was being done.

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