

Echoes of Betrayal: Exploring Toxic Friendships among Indian Young Adults

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Abstract: Friendships are conceptualized as relationships built on the foundations of companionship, mutuality, and reciprocity. Yet when they grow toxic, they can cause emotional distress. The present study aimed to investigate toxic behaviors within friendships. Thirty-six students (males=8, females=28) enrolled in undergraduate courses at the University of Delhi were recruited using purposive sampling. The method of focus group discussions (FGD) was used to collect data which was then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three main themes were found: red flags, psychological impact, and post beliefs. The findings suggest that toxic friendships emerge as a relational process marked by a sense of betrayal, manipulation, boundary violations, and exclusion. The impacts include emotional exhaustion, diminished self-worth, and identity disruptions. These experiences reshape individuals' beliefs, fostering distrust and disengagement, although some exhibit adaptive coping. These findings highlight the need to address these patterns for their implications in clinical and social settings.

Keywords: toxic friendships, thematic analysis, young adults, Indian

Friendship is generally regarded as a voluntary relationship involving commitment and care towards another person. However, not all friendships consist of healthy interactions between friends. Neither do all interactions with friends bring happiness or peace. Some hurtful experiences can lead friendships to turn 'toxic' in nature (Rahimah et al., 2022). In the Oxford dictionary, toxic means poisonous, and in the context of relationships, toxicity refers to the dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, potentially harming an individual physically, socially, and emotionally. Toxic friends may be regarded as those who knowingly or unknowingly create negative feelings and experiences affecting the cognitive and emotional functioning of an individual and adversely affecting their psychological well-being. There are three types of toxic relationships, namely toxic parenting (unhealthy relationship with parents), toxic partner, and toxic friends (unhealthy relationship with friends), which affect the mental health of the individuals who are at the receiving end (Anugrah et al., 2024). This particular article focuses only on toxic friendships.

There are a variety of theories that explain why people form friendship bonds, stay in relationships, or terminate them, and why they choose certain people over others. The Social Exchange Theory by Homans (1958) suggests that individuals maintain friendships when the rewards received in the relationship outweigh the costs of its

maintenance. The attachment theories by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) take a developmental stance through the concept of the internal working model. These theorists suggest that early attachment experiences with caregivers influence the interpersonal relationships people form in their later life. Knapp's relational development model (1978) focuses explicitly on the development and dissolution of relationships through a ten-step process, bifurcated into two phases- coming together and coming apart. The model presupposes that the relationship will ultimately dissolve. However, coming apart need not be seen as inherently bad. Later literature seems to focus on what makes relationships healthy. According to Roffey (2012), the 6 principles of healthy relationships are ASPIRE - Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect, and Equality. Toxic relationships are likely to violate these principles in several ways. The growing scholarly attention given to toxic friendships is situated within the broader recognition of relational health as a determinant of mental well-being (White & Jha, 2023). While healthy friendships are associated with reduced stress (Kantor & Vuletić, 2024) and increased happiness (Lynch, 2015), toxic friendships are linked to distress and diminished self-esteem, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Dewi (2025) found that 78% of students reported experiencing unhealthy friendships, which negatively impacted their academic performance, self-esteem, stress, and motivation. The relationship wheel is an activity used

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in educational and therapeutic settings to identify toxic patterns. As a conceptual tool, it is based on the wheel theory of love (Reiss, 1960; Anderson, 2016), which visualizes relationships as involving both healthy components (e.g., self-disclosure) and unhealthy behaviours (e.g., disrespect, control). If the evaluation of a relationship indicates a pattern of emotional or verbal abuse, professional consultation is sought. This model attempts to identify the toxic benchmarks in romantic relationships, but it is not often applied to friendships. Overall, much prior research focuses on toxic dynamics in familial and romantic relationships, but friendship dynamics remain underexplored in the Indian socio-cultural context. The study addresses the existing gap by exploring toxic behaviors prevalent in relationships between friends and how they impact the lives of young people.

Method

The present study employed a qualitative research design to examine toxic patterns within friendships among young people. The researchers adopted the social constructivism paradigmatic stance, which sees reality as constructed and co-constructed by its stakeholders. Additionally, necessary ethical precautions were taken during the study, ensuring confidentiality, taking informed consent, and allowing participants to withdraw at any point they felt uncomfortable.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, people with lived experiences of toxic friendships were invited to participate in the study. The final study was conducted with 36 participants (female $n=28$; male $n=8$). The participants were recruited from various undergraduate courses (natural sciences, social sciences, and commerce) at the University of Delhi, and were enrolled in their first, second, or third year of study. The age group of participants ranged between 18 and 25 years who had experienced conflicts in their friendship in the last 6 months duration.

Method and Procedure

The data was collected through focus group discussions (FGD). Three separate FGDs were conducted with the researcher as moderator. There were 12 participants in each discussion to facilitate the generation of diverse

perspectives and invite elaborate discussion on various facets of toxic friendship experiences. A larger number of participants also ensured researcher to gauge the nuances of agreements and disagreements among participants during their discussion on their subjective experiences of conflicting friendships. The three discussions took 45, 75, and 52 minutes, respectively. The discussions were conducted in participants' college classrooms. The participant demographics (age, gender, and education) were noted, and consent was taken. The sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. In each FGD, the participants were introduced to the term 'toxicity' as the patterns or actions that made them feel unpleasant about themselves or their friends. They were prompted to discuss these patterns using the narratives from their lives. The participants were probed for more details, wherever required.

Data Analysis

Following transcription, 57 instances of distinct toxic experiences were extracted from the discussion. These units of analysis were purposively extracted based on their conceptual relevance to the research questions. Data was analysed using the six-step framework of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) involving: (1) familiarization of the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of emerging themes, (4) critically reviewing and refining of the themes, (5) naming and defining them and finally (6) producing the report. An audit trail was meticulously maintained for tracking the process of refining codes to achieve the major themes of this study.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis approach employs six transparent steps of identifying the patterns in the data. The eventual development of themes requires consistent and multiple readings of the data. In this case, the 57 instances were identified and re-visited multiple times. After coding the instances, themes were carefully identified, reviewed, and defined. For example, statements describing self-guilt, overthinking, and nervousness were initially coded separately but were later grouped under the broader theme of psychological impact. The analysis resulted in three major themes, namely Red flags, Psychological impact, and Post-beliefs. *Red-flags* refers to behaviours that

appear to violate the boundaries of an individual in some way and thus come across as warning signs about the friendship. *Psychological impact* refers effect the toxic patterns have on the emotional and cognitive wellness of an individual. The third theme *post-beliefs* reflects the

changed opinions about friends and friendship in general after experiencing toxicity. Table 1 and Figure 1 present the themes derived from the data.

Table 1: Themes and related textual segments

THEMES	TEXTUAL SEGMENTS FROM THE DISCUSSION ³
The Red Flags	
Sense of injustice	<i>"I was vulnerable in front of my friends, so they got to know that I generally don't attend school because of family issues. One day, I heard her telling this to a stranger we met like 5 minutes ago. And she started laughing."</i> [P3, female, aged 22]
Interpersonal disconnection	<i>"It is hard to explain, but you just know when the two of you are not vibing anymore, it is not about the likes or dislikes, but the way you both stop contacting each other and like fall out of friendship with them."</i> [P8, Female, age 24]
Social exclusion	<i>"Who doesn't want to enjoy with their group of friends, huh? But I felt so betrayed when my friend group didn't invite me at all to a certain place, which I got to know through Instagram. I mean, I wouldn't have gone at that time because I was busy, but then, as a friend, couldn't they have asked me once, or told me that they were meeting? When confronted, they said that they knew (I) would not come, so we didn't invite you in the first place"</i> [P15, Male, aged 25]
Boundary violations	<i>"There was this person who used to call me a lot, and when it was late at night, when I couldn't pick up the call, she used to text me, and there were days when I slept less because I wanted to be there during her breakup, and even when she was fighting with the other guy. But one day, when I wanted to vent out about my issues, the answer I got was unavailability"</i> [P1, Female, aged 22]
Mockery	<i>"I understand that there are inside jokes amongst friends, but is it always me who is being mocked? I was even made fun of by my college friends in front of my work friends"</i> [P10, Female, aged 21]
Gaslighting	<i>"I didn't know it was manipulation at that time but one day I was supposed to meet my friends but suddenly my mother got ill and there was no one at home to take care of her, so obviously I stayed and I told them that I cannot meet you people today and the reply I got was something like I don't respect their time and those people and sadly it made me feel bad"</i> [P5, Male, aged 23]
Being a doormat	<i>"During my college, my group used to contact me when they had some assignment work, or they wanted to study, and in compensation, they always brought me a burger. I was always the pushover. I don't know if it was my fault for getting treated like this for such a long time, like how they say the bullied victim is equally responsible for their condition. I guess I enjoyed that someone was there..... ignoring the toxicity"</i> [P16, Female, aged 21]

Psychological Impact

Diminished self-worth vs
Relational resilience

"I had to change a lot of school sections because that was the kind of protocol my school had. I wanted and even tried to be in touch with my friends, but gradually the communication decreased from the previous sections. But you know, when you are so young, you cannot really rationalise the reasons, but I realised I stopped communicating with my new school friends because I knew that they would also gradually lose touch." [P15, Male, age 24]

Emotional exhaustion

"There was one time when I was too burned out from my friend's actions that I no longer was trying to even prepare for her birthdays. Despite knowing she will create a scene if I don't surprise her for her birthday, but even then I was too tired to happily plan anything for her." [P19, Female, age 23]

Shattered expectations

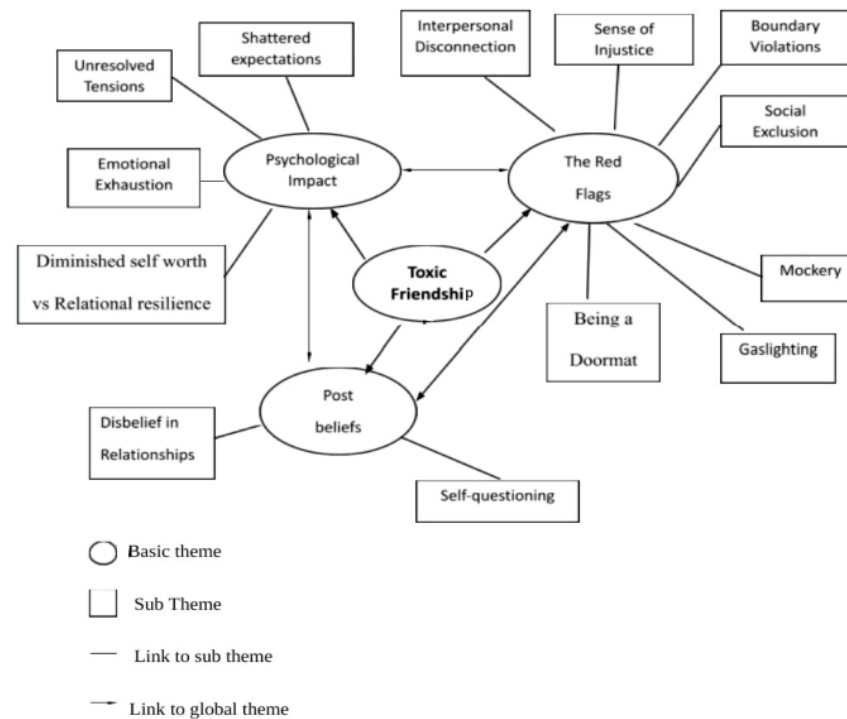
"I have always been seen fighting for the rights of my friends, from strangers calling them random things to fighting for sharing the same seats in college. Naturally, I do really expect them to do the same thing from them, and one day I was fighting with a person for us three for a club allotment, and instead of them supporting me, I saw them telling that guy that it is fine, they can take a separate club" [P22, Female, age 24]

Unresolved tensions

"I still have lots of questions and Gile shikwe (resentments) with my school friends. When I left my hometown, I was not very active on Instagram, but after a few months, when I opened my ID, I saw I was no longer following them, and they were not following me either. So I sent requests again, assuming it must be an internet glitch. After a week, when I reopened, only one person accepted the request, and when asked about phone numbers, the message was still unread." [P33, Female, age 20]

Self-questioning

"I am an introvert and do not really enjoy outside parties, but my friends' group is total party animals, and everyone in my college used to know them except me. There are often times when I tried to be as energetic as them, and questioned myself if I am the wrong person who cannot fit in their circle, but I couldn't be like them" [P18, Female, age 22]



A common thread in the narratives collected for the study was the presence of the self-serving attributional bias. The narratives reflected experiences where the participants were at the receiving end of toxic behaviours, and thus the entire responsibility of the situation was placed on the shoulders of the other party. Therefore, there was a tendency to conceptualize oneself as a victim (Shepperd et al., 2008). There also seemed to be a sense of learned helplessness among the participants while discussing toxic friendships (Seligman, 1970).

The Red Flags. The first sub-theme within this broader theme was a perceived 'sense of injustice'. It reflects how perceived imbalances in the fairness within friendships contribute to feelings of betrayal. Participants described situations in which personal information, shared in moments of emotional vulnerability, was disclosed without consent. This suggests that toxicity in friendships may not always arise from overly harmful acts, but from subtle breaches of trust that affect the emotional safety of an individual. Such experiences can be understood through equity theory (Adams, 1965), which posits that individuals evaluate fairness in friendship based on perceived balance between the contributions and

the outcomes. The imbalances in friendship are measured significantly in terms of inequity (Mendelson & Kay, 2003). In this context, the violation of perceived equity leads to a distressed feeling as described by the participants. The second sub-theme to emerge was 'interpersonal disconnection', which focuses on a perceived sense of emotional distancing over time. Participants described friendships that ended gradually as they lost depth and regular communication. The toxicity in friendship manifested through passive processes of withdrawal rather than explicit conflict. Such patterns can be understood through Knapp's relationship model (1978), which outlines the stages of gradual de-escalation of relationships through processes like stagnation and eventual disengagement. However, situational conflicts can contribute to relational shifts that weaken emotional bonds over time. The third sub-theme was 'social exclusion', which reflects actions that contribute to the marginalization of specific individuals within friendship networks. Participants described experiencing intentional or unintentional social exclusion, which created feelings of isolation and emotional distress. Repeated social exclusion causes feelings of social alienation and reinforces a sense of being an 'outsider' within one's own social network. This means that the boundaries of who belongs to the in-group shift. In-group and out-group distinctions lead to structural inequalities within

interpersonal relationships (Del Real, 2019). The next relevant theme was ‘boundary violations’, which reflects patterns of relational overstepping. It also involves a pattern of a friend taking more than they give. Participants described situations where friends demanded more emotional support than they reciprocated, which left the participants feeling that they were being taken for granted. The cost-benefit analysis of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) asserts that the consistent imbalance between emotional investment and exchange contributes to relational dissatisfaction. It may also be noted that boundaries within friendships tend to be more fluid and less explicitly defined than familial relationships, making them more susceptible to violations. If this appears recurrently in relational patterns, it can impact psychological health (Allan, 2005). Another sub-theme that emerged under the theme of Red Flags was ‘mockery’. Mockery in friendships can function as a form of passive-aggressive communication. Mockery acts as a double-edged sword, where sometimes it can increase shared intimacy among friends but it can also create emotional pain by fostering feelings of inferiority in the person who is being mocked. Humour, depending on its nature, can either act as a facilitating interaction tool, reinforcing friendship bonds, or act as a source of emotional discomfort. Sarcasm framed as humour targeting personal flaws can leave a person feeling uncomfortable and devalued. These interactions, characterized by passive-aggressive undertones and criticism masked as humour, make it difficult for individuals to openly challenge the behaviour. Such behaviours may stem from underlying insecurities, which can arise from academic, social, or psychological comparisons between friends (Petric, 2019). The sixth sub-theme to emerge was ‘gaslighting’, which is a covert form of relational toxicity characterized by perception manipulation, reduction in self-trust, and reinforced power imbalance. It refers to situations where one side makes the other person perceive things in a self-blaming manner. Such patterns of psychological manipulation led people to question their own perceptions and emotions within the friendship. Sometimes friends reframe the situation in a way that evokes self-doubt and guilt. Gaslighting highlights power imbalances within the relationship, where one individual exerts greater control over the other, causing the victim to experience a sense of isolation, devaluation, and lack of control over the situation. It has also been observed to cause instances of

“surreality” where the victim starts accepting the dominance of the fake good abuser. Manipulative behaviours in close relationships are associated with personality factors and defensive strategies aimed at perceiving self-image or control (Akdeniz & Cihan, 2024). The final sub-theme observed was ‘being a doormat’. The theme reflects a pattern of self-sacrificial behaviour in which individuals consistently prioritize the needs of others over their own, often at the expense of their self-respect and autonomy. Participants described situations where they were primarily approached by friends in times of need, particularly for emotional comfort, while their own needs remained unacknowledged. Such self-centred patterns used manipulation as a strategy to persuade people to do things they were uncomfortable with, and caused one-sided effort devoid of a sense of mutuality and reciprocity. Individuals occupying less advantageous positions in these circumstances usually experience unequal relational power, producing feelings of frustration as they realize that their friends may strategically invest in the friendship only for their own personal growth and social positioning (Iha, 2025).

Psychological impact. Psychological impact. The second theme Psychological impact encompasses cognitive (changed beliefs) and affective effects on overall well-being. Judgement and imposition are some toxic tendencies that affect the mental health of a person (Muhiddin et al., 2023). These experiences often generate negative emotional states, which, over time, may impair the individual’s ability to regulate their emotions effectively. Research shows that prolonged exposure to negative emotions may lead to emotional dysregulation after two years (Borowski & Zeman, 2025). This highlights the gradual impact of toxic interactions in shaping both emotional and cognitive experiences. In combination, these findings demonstrate the role of consistent negative emotional experiences in influencing individuals’ perceptions and, in turn, their well-being. The first sub-theme, ‘diminished self-worth versus relational resilience,’ reflects the paradoxical nature of responses to toxic friendships, where some participants reported a reduction in self-esteem, while others discussed similar instances as the facilitators of personal growth. Thus, it should be noted that negative relational experiences do not always result in diminished self-esteem. Existing literature provides support to the idea that individuals

exposed to toxic friendships may normalize behaviours that are considered harmful and subsequently experience a decline in self-worth (Sachi & Limanta, 2024). However, the current findings reveal an alternative response pattern, where individuals reframe adverse experiences in a manner that promotes self-worth. These contrasting responses suggest that the psychological impact of toxic friendships is mediated by individual differences in coping strategies.

The next sub-theme is ‘emotional exhaustion’, which is a state of psychological depletion arising from repeated exposure to toxic interactions, emphasizing that they affect the perception of social support negatively (Yu & Ang, 2024). The patterns found in this study suggest that a lack of reciprocal support causes strenuous exhaustion, intensifies relationship fatigue, and such toxicity reduces emotional resources, contributing to emotional disengagement. The responses also indicate the reduction in emotional capacity and decreased motivation to sustain friendships, which is evident from the participants’ responses of feeling drained. They described their experience as “walking on eggshells,” feeling irritable, and having a constant sense of unease, suggesting increased emotional alertness. The remaining two sub-themes that were found in the data were ‘shattered expectations’ and ‘unresolved tensions.’ The former reflects the breakdown of relational expectations leading to distress and withdrawal, which the participants described as disengaging from communication, including temporarily avoiding messaging platforms as a means of coping with emotional exhaustion. Thus, unmet expectations can reduce the motivation of individuals to invest in both present and future relationships. As the need for companionship remains fundamental, individuals continue to form social connections (de Vries, 2025). Experiences with other individuals often reshape expectations, influencing the manner in which future relationships are approached.

The sub-theme of ‘unresolved tensions’ reflects the tension between distress in relationships and the difficulty in actively disengaging from toxic friendships. These elements are often shaped by the way an individual employs conflict resolution strategies in their friendships. This research indicates that limited social support can make it difficult for individuals to exit unhealthy relationships, as external validation plays a crucial role in

decision-making (Villar et al., 2025). Despite ongoing discomfort, people often avoid confrontation and prefer distancing themselves from their friend who is perceived as toxic. It can be seen from the responses of the participants that individuals appear to prefer carrying on with distressed friendships over facing social isolation, reflecting the fundamental need for belonging. This is indicated by the research on cultural perspectives, suggesting that while friendships are valued, active efforts toward maintaining or dissolving them are often underemphasized (Lahad & van Hooff, 2022).

Post-Beliefs. The third major theme of *Post-Beliefs* highlights the shifts in belief systems, followed by the experiences of toxic friendships. Such changes may be influenced by multiple factors, but interactions with toxic friends appear to play a significant role. Prior research indicates that individuals engaging in post-event processing, particularly those with higher social anxiety, are more likely to exhibit negative affect and interpretative biases (Makkar & Grisham, 2013). Thus, suggests that the changes in beliefs are not solely a direct outcome of toxic interactions but are also shaped by broader individual and ecological factors. ‘Disbelief in relationships’ and ‘self-questioning’ were discussed as sub-themes to explain post-belief patterns in friendships, emphasizing a sense of betrayal in friendships. Betrayal in friendships not only disrupts trust but also reshapes cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret and engage in future friendships. The sub-theme of ‘disbelief in relationships’ reflects experiences of betrayal that contribute to the development of negative and predictive beliefs about relationships. Repeated experiences of toxicity lead people to anticipate similar outcomes in future interactions, reinforcing patterns of distrust. Such belief formation can be shaped by differences in perception and communication, including those influenced by gendered socialization (Shridevi et al., 2024), which can contribute to misinterpretations and conflicts. Additionally, the unexpressed expectations and beliefs can lead to hostility over time. In terms of ‘self-questioning’, toxic experiences with friends destabilize the individuals’ internal sense of identity and self-worth. This sub-theme reflects the impact of friendship breakdowns on individuals’ sense of self and stability. Experiences of toxicity were found to challenge core aspects of their identity, contributing to the feelings of uncertainty and ontological insecurity (Smart et. al., 2012). Self-esteem,

self-confidence, and self-concept may be adversely affected in toxic relational environments (Praptiningsih et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Toxic relationships can be a part of any relationship, ranging from friends to family (Praptiningsih, et al., 2024). Toxic friendships are not isolated incidents but complex, patterned processes that impact both relational functioning and psychological well-being. These findings of the present research assert the need for greater attention to friendship dynamics within research and practice, particularly in understanding interactional patterns between friends. The results suggest that despite contextual differences among participants, the dynamics of toxic patterns, their psychological impact, and beliefs were similar, showcasing the major themes of betrayal, injustice, and feeling unloved. The themes of red flags and post-beliefs are aligned with Beck's cognitive theory (1967) and Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), stemming from relational disruption to cognitive restructuring. Attachment theory states that early caregiver relationships shape avoidant and anxious attachment styles, which foster maladaptive patterns influencing friendship bonds in later life. Relational maintenance theory (Stafford & Canary, 1991) suggests that equitable positivity and shared tasks sustain bonds; yet, as social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964) and equity theory (Adams, 1965) suggest, perceived inequities trigger initial red flags. These further direct to Beck's cognitive behavioural framework, where toxic experiences distort thoughts, behaviours, and emotions, fostering post-beliefs that demand restructuring for future friendship decisions. The wheel theory of love further complements the emphasis on symmetrical intimacy that appears to be missing in the unhealthy relationships between friends. Integrating these theories delineates asymmetrical standards of toxic behaviours, which highlights the requirement of benchmarks for differentiating the healthy from unhealthy patterns of behaviour among friends. Such understanding of disruptive behavioural patterns and belief systems in friendships may help in navigating and identifying red flags to reduce their psychological impact.

Limitations and Implications

As the present research followed FGD as a method of data collection, a few separate participants refrained from sharing their personal experiences of friendships openly in a group discussion, which seemed a potential limitation of the study. These limitations notwithstanding, the study highlights the requirement of psycho-educational interventions to help individuals distinguish between normal and toxic relational conflicts in Indian settings. The findings of this research offer behavioural indicators that can facilitate therapists to detect the early signs of unhealthy behaviour patterns which may be integrated into assessment protocols, to design useful interventions. Web-based screening and support tools for assessing and dealing with unhealthy behaviours of friendships can also be created based on the outcomes of this study.

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