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## Children of Migrant Parents: Psycho-social Well-being in Age and Gender Context

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### ABSTRACT

Parental labor migration in Georgia remains a significant psycho-social challenge with a substantial impact on adolescent development and well-being. This study examined the psycho-social well-being, resilience, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation among children of migrant parents within an age and gender context using a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 89 adolescents (aged 12–18, including 22 left-behind children), alongside qualitative expert interviews with 8 psychologists. Independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between children of migrant and non-migrant parents regarding psycho-social well-being ( $p = .566$ ), resilience ( $p = .750$ ), or fear of negative evaluation ( $p = .693$ ). However, children of migrant parents exhibited significantly lower self-esteem ( $p = .032$ ). Qualitative findings highlighted the severe emotional vulnerability of left-behind adolescents and illuminated how maternal versus paternal migration alters emotional experiences. Theoretically, this study advances migration literature by identifying maternal presence as a crucial cultural "buffer" that helps preserve adolescent well-being amid paternal absence in Georgia. Empirically, it demonstrates that standardized well-being scales may overlook internalized distress, positioning self-esteem as the primary, sensitive indicator of structural family shifts. Practically, these findings offer an empirical foundation for school psychologists, regional care networks, and policymakers to design targeted, culturally sensitive psycho-social interventions that support remaining caregivers and protect left-behind youth.

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# ემიგრანტი მშობლების შვილები; ფსიქო-სოციალური კეთილდღეობა ასაკობრივ და გენდერულ ჭრილში

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სტატის შესახებ	აბსტრაქტი
<p><i>საკვანძო სიტყვები:</i></p> <p>მშობელთა მიგრაცია                      მოზარდები                      რისკ-ფაქტორები                      დამცავი ფაქტორები                      საქართველო</p>	<p>მშობელთა შრომითი მიგრაცია საქართველოში კვლავ რჩება მნიშვნელოვან ფსიქო-სოციალურ გამოწვევად, რომელსაც არსებითი გავლენა აქვს მოზარდთა განვითარებასა და კეთილდღეობაზე. წინამდებარე კვლევაში, შერეული მეთოდოლოგიური დიზაინის გამოყენებით, ასაკობრივ და გენდერულ კონტექსტში შესწავლილ იქნა მიგრანტი მშობლების შვილების ფსიქო-სოციალური კეთილდღეობა, მედეგობა, თვითშეფასება და ნეგატიური შეფასების შიში. რაოდენობრივი მონაცემები შეგროვდა 89 მოზარდისგან (ასაკი 12–18 წელი, მათ შორის 22 მიგრანტის შვილი), რასაც თან ახლდა თვისებრივი ექსპერტული ინტერვიუები 8 ფსიქოლოგთან. დამოუკიდებელი შერჩევების t-ტესტმა აჩვენა, რომ მიგრანტი და არამიგრანტი მშობლების შვილებს შორის არ ვლინდება სტატისტიკურად მნიშვნელოვანი განსხვავება ფსიქო-სოციალური კეთილდღეობის (<math>p = .566</math>), მედეგობის (<math>p = .750</math>) ან ნეგატიური შეფასების შიშის (<math>p = .693</math>) თვალსაზრისით. თუმცა, მიგრანტი მშობლების შვილებმა გამოავლინეს მნიშვნელოვანად დაბალი თვითშეფასება (<math>p = .032</math>). თვისებრივმა მიგნებებმა ხაზი გაუსვა დატოვებული მოზარდების მწვავე ემოციურ მოწყვლადობას და ნათელი მოჰფინა იმას, თუ როგორ ცვლის ემოციურ გამოცდილებას დედის მიგრაცია მამის მიგრაციასთან შედარებით. თეორიულ დონეზე, ეს კვლევა ამდიდრებს მიგრაციის შესახებ არსებულ ლიტერატურას დედის ყოფნის, როგორც უმნიშვნელოვანესი კულტურული „ბუფერის“ იდენტიფიცირებით, რომელიც საქართველოში მამის არყოფნის პირობებში მოზარდის კეთილდღეობის შენარჩუნებას უწყობს ხელს. ემპირიულად კვლევა აჩვენებს, რომ კეთილდღეობის სტანდარტიზებულმა სკალებმა შესაძლოა ვერ დააფიქსირონ ინტერნალიზებული (შინაგანი) სტრესი, რაც თვითშეფასებას წარმოაჩენს ოჯახის სტრუქტურული ცვლილებების პირველად, მგრძობიარე ინდიკატორად. პრაქტიკული თვალსაზრისით, ეს მიგნებები სთავაზობს ემპირიულ საფუძველს სკოლის ფსიქოლოგებს, რეგიონულ მზრუნველობის ქსელებსა და პოლიტიკის</p>

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## **1. Introduction**

Under the conditions of modern globalization, labor migration is no longer considered only an economic process; it is a prerequisite for the formation of transnational families, the transformation of social structure, and a fundamental change in child development. The increase in the number of migrants on an international scale (approximately 304 million) (UN DESA, 2025) turns migration into a complex socio-psychological phenomenon, which has a direct impact on the emotional well-being and sense of security of the children left behind.

In Georgia, migration remains one of the most acute challenges. According to Geostat (2024) data, the country's population decreased by more than 14,000 in the last year alone, while migration flows are mainly represented by young and able-bodied groups. In the Georgian cultural context, where the family is a collective value, the parent's departure is perceived not only as physical distance, but also as a state of "ambiguous loss," a condition when the parent is not physically present, but psychologically constantly exists in the child's life.

International studies (Zhao et al., 2017; Fellmeth et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2020) unanimously indicate that parental migration is often connected to anxiety, emotional stress, self-esteem disorders, and "frozen grief." However, there exist cultural differences, during which the identification of those protective factors that promote the adolescent's resilience under the conditions of the parent's absence acquires special importance.

The purpose of the present work was the complex analysis of the psycho-social well-being of children of migrant parents in the context of age and gender, during which the research was interested in those protective factors that help the child in the process of adaptation under the conditions of parental migration.

Using a mixed methodological design, the study connected statistical data with expert visions, and the dynamics of fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, resilience, and social support were outlined. The practical value of the work lies in the findings and the development of those recommendations that will help caregivers, schools, and psychological services in creating a supportive environment for the children of migrant parents.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Parent's Role in Child Development**

Parents play a decisive role in the development of children. According to Liu and colleagues (2024), when parents actively participate in their children's lives and education, their involvement promotes the

child's academic success, healthy psychological development, and strengthens the child's sense of security (Liu et al., 2024).

Against this background, it becomes important to consider the parent's absence as a separate phenomenon. The parent's absence has two main forms (Boss, 2002, 2007). The first is physical absence, when the parent migrates and no longer participates in the child's daily life. The second is emotional absence, when the parent may physically interact with the child; however, remains emotionally distant, inconsistent, or less involved in their life (Boss, 2002, 2007). Irregular or rare contact strengthens the feeling of abandonment, emotional distance, and insecurity. However, only the frequency of communication is not enough. It is important what emotional load the parent's and child's communication carries. Short, superficial, or conflict-filled conversations may fail to provide the stable emotional connection that the child needs from the parent.

Boss (2002, 2007) explains that there are situations when a person is physically absent, but psychologically as if they exist, or vice versa, when they are physically present, but emotionally not. This creates emotional uncertainty, "ambiguous loss." In transnational families, children are in exactly such a state: they know that the parent exists, but their absence in daily life creates an emotional void and indefiniteness. This uncertain emotional state often causes confusion, sadness, the feeling of abandonment, or "frozen" grief: a state when the sense of loss cannot be completed, because the separation of the parent and child has no certain end.

## **2.2. Migration as a Social Phenomenon**

In modern reality, migration is considered a social phenomenon, which represents one of the most widely spread and important social challenges related to the parent's absence. Migration is a multifaceted global process that combines social, demographic, political, and psychological dimensions (Navas et al., 2020). According to UN-DESA (2025) data, the number of international migrants is approximately 304 million, which turns migration not only into an economic but also a socio-psychological phenomenon. Against the background of migration, the separation of an unpredictable character or uncertain duration increases the feeling of uncertainty and emotional insecurity in the child. Attachment theory suggests that those relationships that are marked by periodic or long-term absences become less reliable for children (Cassidy, 2013).

Georgia's migration profile in the global framework is determined by post-Soviet transformations, demographic dynamics, and labor market constraints. According to Geostat (2024), in 2024 the country's population decreased by more than 14,000, while migration is especially high in young and able-bodied groups. According to OECD (2022) data, in the years 2000–2019, the number of Georgia's migrants in OECD countries increased from 1,400 to almost 30,000.

While global migration literature extensively documents the macroeconomic drivers and structural shifts within transnational families (Dreby, 2010; Nobles, 2011), a significant research gap persists regarding the micro-level, subjective socio-psychological adaptations within post-Soviet, transitional societies like Georgia. Local studies underscore that Georgian labor migration is heavily shaped by sudden fractures in traditional, collectivist family units, yet empirical data mapping the acute psychological ripple effects

on left-behind youth remains critically underrepresented. Consequently, there is a pressing need to move beyond economic statistics to critically examine the systemic emotional realities of these families

Mazzucato (Mazzucato et al., 2015) in her research indicates that parental migration is an independent phenomenon and not just a subcategory of labor migration. Unlike the traditional approach focused on economic factors, it includes care, emotional, and relational dimensions. Authors Dreby (2010) and Nobles (2011) show that parental migration forms transnational care models and changes care obligations. Researchers Parreñas (2005) and Hoang & Yeoh (2015) emphasize that these processes transform attachment and family roles, which require the formation of a new form of emotional closeness.

Furthermore, according to studies (Graham & Jordan, 2011; UNICEF, 2020), mother's and father's migration has different impacts on children's emotional and social development. During mother's migration, the caused emotional loss is connected with an increase in children's feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and separation, while father's migration is relatively more often reflected in behavioral variability and discipline. Psychosocial results related to parental migration are widely studied in various societies. For example, according to authors (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Fellmeth et al., 2018), the experience of separation is connected with the feeling of abandonment, anxiety, and stress. Long-term separation from the parent, irregular communication, and unstable care increase the risk of children's emotional distress. Along with this, Baldassar and Merla (2014) emphasize that despite the availability of technological communication, physical absence has a significant impact on the child's daily life, emotional connection, and sense of security.

According to studies (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Zhao et al., 2017), children's psycho-social well-being is conditioned by age, gender, care system, family dynamics, and social support. Some children exhibit a feeling of insecurity, especially at a young age, while in adolescence, identity formation difficulties and behavioral disorders are noted. However, at the same time, UNICEF (2020) data indicate that with proper care from remaining family members, regular communication with the departed parent, and school support, parental migration may reflect positively on the child in the context of academic motivation.

### **2.3. The impact of parent's migration on the child's psycho-social well-being**

Parental migration in many ways exerts influence on the psycho-social well-being of left-behind children and is reflected in their emotional background, behavioral models, and social relations. Psychosocial well-being is defined as a child's ability to maintain emotional stability, develop healthy self-esteem, and receive adequate social support from family members and peers (UNICEF, 2020). Long-term absence of a parent may significantly disrupt the natural dynamics of child development (Zhao et al., 2017). Parental migration is sharply reflected in children's emotional life. Long-term separation from the parent often causes sadness, longing, the feeling of abandonment or insecurity, especially when communication is irregular or care is unstable (Fellmeth et al., 2018). At the behavioral level, such children may manifest irritability, aggressive reactions, closing off, or a decrease in academic engagement, which are several indicators of stress resulting from parental migration (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Lu et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2017).

As a result of migration, redistribution of roles occurs in families: redistribution of caregiving functions to grandparents or older siblings changes the structure of relations and implies additional emotional challenges. Such adolescents often become victims of bullying and stigma from their peers, which further worsens the well-being of migrant children and increases social isolation and the weakening of self-esteem (Fauk et al., 2024).

Migration also changes family roles and responsibilities: redistribution of caregiving functions among grandparents and older siblings often increases emotional and practical load, which creates additional challenges (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). Age differences are clearly outlined: in small age children, distress related to attachment disorder dominates, while in adolescents, identity crisis and threat-containing behaviors.

Anxiety and chronic stress, which are often accompanied by uncertainty about the parent's return date and duration, are named as the most widespread difficulties (Zhao et al., 2017).

Mother's migration in many cultures, among them in Georgian, is connected with a deeper feeling of emotional loss (Graham & Jordan, 2011), while behavioral difficulties, a decrease in interest toward learning, and irritability are regularly recorded in many countries (UNICEF, 2020). In heavy cases, the risk of depression, self-injury, and suicidal thoughts increases, especially when communication with the parent is rare or emotionally distant (Fellmeth et al., 2018).

Global meta-analyses frequently link parental absence to externalizing behavioral issues and academic decline in children (Fellmeth et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2020). However, this institutional framework often overlooks the specific phenomenon of 'internalized distress'-such as quiet withdrawal, emotional closing off, or suppressed grief-which is highly prevalent in Georgian cultural dynamics (Odilavadze, 2023). Regional studies in the Caucasus indicate that due to high societal stigma surrounding mental health, adolescents often maintain a surface-level presentation of resilience, effectively masking severe underlying self-esteem deficits. Existing literature fails to reconcile this discrepancy between standardized well-being scores and qualitative emotional realities, a critical empirical gap that this study directly aims to bridge.

#### **2.4. Difference in Age and Gender Context**

Demographic indicators, such as age and sex, represent important factors for studying the psycho-social well-being of migrant parents' children, since it manifests in the process of emotional expression and psychological adaptation in adolescents (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021; Fauk et al., 2024). Changes caused in the child's life against the background of parental migration may increase the probability of psycho-social difficulties, since adolescents simultaneously encounter the emotional challenges characteristic of their age and at the same time are deprived of stable support from the parent's side. Thus, age influences the forms of expression and regulation of psychological difficulties, however it does not determine the existence of these difficulties (Fellmeth et al., 2018).

Younger age children more exhibit distress related to attachment disorder, whereas in adolescents, withdrawal, identity crisis or threat-containing behaviors are more frequently recorded (Hoang & Yeoh,

2015). Younger age children express emotional needs more openly, while adolescents are more prone to emotional withdrawal, which complicates communication and emotional self-expression (Antia et al., 2022). Adolescents often react to psychological difficulties by suppressing emotions, decreasing involvement or behavioral changes, which are less visible, although they may have a more long-term character.

Sex is also one of the important components. Studies (Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021) show that sex plays an important role in how psychological difficulties manifest in children of migrant parents; however, it less determines their general vulnerability. Adolescent girls more frequently experience emotional difficulties within themselves and report higher levels of sadness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and emotional distance from parents (Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021). In contrast to this, behavioral reactions are more manifest in boys, among them behavior problems and difficulties related to order. Researchers (Fauk et al., 2024) distinguish challenges existing in girls based on the expectation of stereotypical gender roles, such as daily activities in the family and care for younger siblings.

Western and Asian migration studies offer conflicting evidence regarding gender-based vulnerability, with some pointing to higher emotional distress in girls and others to behavioral disruptions in boys (Cui et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). In Georgia, this dynamic is deeply confounded by rigid cultural expectations surrounding gendered caregiving roles, where the mother traditionally serves as the emotional anchor of the household. While international frameworks treat parental migration as a homogenous variable, local qualitative data suggest that the gender of the migrating parent interacts uniquely with the gender and age of the adolescent (Antia et al., 2022). There remains a distinct scarcity of mixed-methods research exploring how these intersectional identities manifest in the daily coping mechanisms of Georgian youth, highlighting the need for a culturally contextualized analysis.

Although studies (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021; Fauk et al., 2024) did not establish significant differences in the gender context, gender determines the forms of external manifestation of problems. In summary, age and sex are important to understand how psychological difficulties manifest in children of migrant parents; however, it less helps us in explaining their intensity (Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Migration impact, as well as negative results caused by the absence of parents, is explained by numerous theoretical approaches.

#### **3.1. Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980; Ainsworth et al., 1978), in the context of parental migration, allows us to see how separation turns into a systemic challenge of security and reliability for the child. The formation of secure attachment is based on consistent, sensitive, and emotionally accessible care. Under the conditions of migration, the limitation of daily interactions and irregular communication turns the parent into a less "reliable figure", which increases the probability of insecure attachment.

The conceptual model of Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978) explains how separation is reflected on the internal perception of trust and security. During parental migration, when the terms of return and emotional quality are uncertain for the child, separation becomes more stressful and disorganized. The child's sense of security and foundations of self-worth are based precisely on these relationships, due to which the parent's absence should be considered not only as a socio-economic, but also as a serious psychological challenge.

### **3.2. Psycho-social Development Theory**

Erikson's psycho-social development model describes how parental migration is reflected on the stages of trust–mistrust, the feeling of initiative–guilt, and later identity formation (Erikson, 1950; Sokol, 2009). A parent's long-term physical or emotional absence weakens those security signals through which the child develops trust, autonomy, and initiative. Mazzucato and others (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2005; Walsh, 2016) indicate that the emotional overload of remaining caregivers often limits the consistent support necessary for the development of autonomy, which later negatively reflects on identity, emotional regulation, and social relationships.

### **3.3. Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory creates an important framework for analyzing the impact of parental migration because it considers the family as an interconnected emotional system where the behavior and emotional state of each member are reflected on the entire system (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). Stability and balance of roles in such systems maintain interpersonal order. Parental migration disrupts this balance and forces the family to reorganize roles, boundaries, and responsibilities (Walsh, 2016).

In Bowen's view, strong interdependence among family members means that the emotional or physical absence of one parent affects the entire system (Bowen, 1978). Minuchin's structural theory adds that migration often causes redistribution of boundaries and roles: children may prematurely take over "adult" functions, such as household chores, care, and emotional support (Minuchin, 1974). Studies confirm that, especially in those families where support is limited, children often take excessive responsibility upon themselves (Schmalzbauer, 2015). Parental migration also increases the probability of triangulation, a process in which tension between two individuals transfers to a third person (Bowen, 1978). The remaining parent or grandmother/grandfather may emotionally lean on the child, whereby boundaries are violated, and additional psychological load is placed on the child. This may cause emotional distance as a protective mechanism or a result of weakened communication (Carling et al., 2012).

Despite the challenges, the theory also emphasizes the family's ability for adaptation: a flexible structure, the existence of supportive caregivers, a stable routine, and effective communication allow children to maintain a sense of security despite the parent's absence (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Consequently, family systems theory shows that parental migration is not only an individual, but also a systemic event, which exerts influence on family dynamics, roles and the emotional well-being of children.

## **4. Methodology**

In the empirical research, a combined method of qualitative and quantitative research was used.

### **4.1. Selection and Procedure**

In the first stage, a quantitative study was conducted, in which 89 adolescents participated. From them, 22 were children of migrant parents, and the remaining 67 were children of non-migrant parents. Their age is from 12 to 18 years. Such a mixed selection made it possible to compare the data of the two groups with each other, as well as to reveal individual differences within the group. The research was conducted in an online format, based on voluntary participation and informed consent. The involvement of minors in the research was ensured by the prior informed consent of the school, teachers, and parents, after which the sending of online questionnaires was carried out confidentially. In the process of research, the anonymity of participants was protected, since identifiable data was not used.

In the second stage of the research, purposive sampling was employed to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight professional psychologists (N = 8). To ensure their eligibility as 'experts' and guarantee the credibility of the insights, strict inclusion criteria were applied: each participant was required to hold at least a Master's degree in Clinical or Counseling Psychology, possess a minimum of three years of active clinical practice, and demonstrate direct, ongoing professional experience in providing psychological therapy or counseling to children and adolescents from transnational or migrant families. The selected experts' professional experience ranged from 3 to 25 years in both public school settings and private psychological services across Georgia, providing them with a comprehensive and grounded understanding of the specific behavioral, emotional, and systemic challenges faced by left-behind youth.

The qualitative data obtained from the expert interviews were analyzed using a rigorous, systematic thematic analysis procedure, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the text was read thoroughly multiple times to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset to capture meaningful statements regarding adolescents' emotional states and family dynamics. Third, these codes were clustered and organized into broader, potential overarching themes. Fourth, the generated themes were reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure context-level consistency and validity. Fifth, themes were defined, named, and conceptualized, which led to the final stabilization of key thematic categories (e.g., emotional vulnerability, gender-specific manifestations of distress, and the role of the remaining caregiver). Sixth, the final analytical report was produced, integrating selected illustrative quotes to support the descriptive narrative.

### **4.2. Instruments and Hypothesis**

The questionnaire used at the quantitative research stage consisted of two parts: Block I: Demographic questions, which included age, family structure; Block II: To measure psycho-social well-being, we used instruments adapted into the Georgian language. Specifically:

**Fear of negative evaluation** was assessed using the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE) developed by Leary (1983). The Georgian adapted version of the scale was developed within the framework of Natia Sordia's doctoral dissertation in psychology (Sordia, 2020).

To measure adolescents' **mental resilience**, the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) was utilized. The original scale consists of 6 items, 3 of which are positively phrased (Items 1, 3, and 5) and 3 of which are reverse-worded (Item 2: 'I have a hard time making it through stressful events'; Item 4: 'It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens'; and Item 6: 'I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life'). Initial reliability analyses yielded a low internal consistency for the total scale, as item-total correlations revealed that the reverse-worded items (2, 4, and 6) correlated weakly with the overall score. This measurement error is consistent with development literature, which indicates that adolescents often experience cognitive difficulties when processing reverse-coded statements, leading to inconsistent response patterns. To enhance data reliability and reduce measurement error, these three reverse-worded items were systematically removed. The construct validity and internal reliability of the modified 3-item version were subsequently verified, demonstrating a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .79$ ) on the current sample, which aligns with recent adaptations in the Georgian cultural context (Odilavadze, 2023).

**Psychological well-being** was assessed by the short version of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009), which includes 8 statements and assesses the sense of meaning in life, social functioning, optimism, and self-perception. The scale is used and empirically tested in Georgian studies, among them in Odilavadze's (2023) doctoral dissertation.

**Individual self-esteem** was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which consists of 10 statements and uses a 4-point Likert-type response format. The Georgian version of the scale was developed by Sumbadze, Kitiashvili, Pirtskhalava, and Maisuradze (2012).

At this stage of the research, the following types of hypotheses were checked:

- **H1:** Adolescents who have one or both parents in migration have a lower average psycho-social well-being score than those who live with their parents.
- **H2:** Under conditions of parental migration, girls have a higher psycho-social well-being score than boys.
- **H3:** Adolescents' psycho-social well-being indicators significantly differ by age.
- **H4:** Children of a migrant parent who have regular contact with their parents have a higher psycho-social well-being indicator compared to those who do not have frequent communication.

After checking the results of the quantitative research and testing the hypotheses, for the purpose of an in-depth understanding of the research, qualitative analysis was also carried out, which provided the possibility for specific trends to be interpreted at the individual and contextual levels. Through the expert interviews conducted with them, the issues to be studied identified in the process of the quantitative research were clarified, which were formed within the framework of desk research and concerned the characteristics of the children of a migrant parent.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1. Quantitative Research Results**

Analysis of the data obtained within the framework of the selection was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, and correlational analysis were used to verify the previously developed hypotheses.

89 adolescents participated in the study. Of them, 22 had one or both parents in migration. 12 were girls (13.5%) and 10-boys (11.2%). According to age, participants were distributed into two groups: 12–14 years (N= 13) and 15–18 years (N= 9). A portion of the respondents (N= 22; 24.7%) had one or both parents in migration, while the majority (N= 67; 75.3%) lived together with parents. Out of 22 participants, in three cases, both parents were in migration, in six cases, only the mother, and in the remaining 13 cases, the father.

According to the frequency of communication with the migrant parent, most participants had frequent contact (N = 19), while a small part-rare contact (N = 2). Missing (N= 1).

#### **5.1.1. Internal Reliability of Instruments**

The internal consistency of the scales used was checked according to Cronbach's alpha. Results are presented in Table #1.

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) was originally developed for the adult population. However, subsequent studies have shown that the scale is successfully used with adolescents as well, due to its short structure and simple content, which reduces the risk of low reliability of the obtained data. Windle and colleagues' (Windle et al., 2011) study confirms that the scale gives reliable and valid results in adolescent samples.

In the present study, the initial analysis of the scale's reliability showed a relatively low indicator of internal consistency. Detailed statistical analysis of the statements revealed that reversely formulated statements were characterized by a weak correlation with the total score. After removing these statements, the scale's Cronbach's alpha indicator increased significantly and reached an acceptable level ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Similar results correspond to international studies (Swain et al., 2008; Van Sonderen et al., 2013), which indicate that reversely formulated statements are often confusing for adolescents and may increase measurement error. Accordingly, the scale was modified, three statements were removed, and the modified version of the scale was used in further analyses.

**Table #1. Internal Consistency Indicators of Research Scales (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ )**

Scale	Number of Statements	Cronbach's $\alpha$
BFNE – Fear of Negative Evaluation	12	.74
BRS – Mental Resilience	6	.79
PWB – Psychological Well-being	8	.91
RSES – Self-esteem	10	.75

**Note.** Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is calculated on the given selection.  $\alpha \geq .70$  indicates acceptable internal consistency of the scale. For the BRS scale, a short, modified version is presented, which includes three statements. **Source:** Data processed by the author.

### 5.1.2. Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine to what extent the indicators of psycho-social well-being (psychological well-being, self-esteem, resilience, and fear of negative evaluation) are related to demographic and situational variables, among them age, sex, parent's migration status, and frequency of communication with the emigrated parent. The analysis was carried out on the whole selection in order to obtain a general picture of possible connections between variables and to outline those trends that could become the basis for intergroup comparisons at the next stage, see Table #2.

Correlation analysis showed that adolescents' psycho-social well-being is related to their resilience and fear of negative evaluation. Specifically, a high indicator of psychological well-being is associated with high resilience and a low level of fear of negative evaluation. Simultaneously, self-esteem is positively related to both well-being and resilience. However, demographic variables (age and sex) within the framework of correlation analysis did not turn out to be significantly related to psycho-social well-being.

**Table #2. Correlations Between Demographic, Situational, and Psycho-social Variables (N = 89)**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	-							
2. Sex	-.03	-						
3. Parent's Migration	-.02	.11	-					
4. Contact with Parent	.23	.31	.49*	-				
5. Psychological Well-being (PWB)	.10	.38*	.26	.38*	-			
6. Resilience (BRS)	-.10	.19	-.06	.23	.57**	-		
7. Self-esteem (RSES)	-.01	.08	-.23	.32	.45**	.46**	-	
8. Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE)	.07	.14	.04	-.14	-.37**	-.45**	-.38**	-

**Note.** Pearson correlation coefficients are presented. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Sex is coded dichotomously. Parent's migration reflects the presence of at least one parent abroad.

### 5.1.3. Analysis of Intergroup Differences in Psycho-social Well-being

Correlation analysis was used to reveal general connections between variables in the whole selection. However, research hypotheses were oriented not only on connections, but also on revealing differences between specific groups, especially in the context of migrant parents' children.

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the indicators of psycho-social well-being between children of migrant and non-migrant parents, as well as in subgroups of migrant parents' children according to age, sex, and frequency of communication with the parent.

#### Children of Migrant and Non-migrant Parents

To reveal differences between children of migrant and non-migrant parents, an independent samples t-test was used. The analysis was conducted on the mean indicators of psycho-social well-being and related scales.

The average indicator of psychological well-being does not differ statistically significantly between those adolescents who have a parent in migration and those who do not ( $t(87) = 0.62, p = .566$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.11$ ). The t-test results also showed that the level of fear of negative evaluation does not differ statistically significantly between children of migrant and non-migrant parents ( $t(87) = -0.40, p = .693$ , Cohen's  $d = -0.09$ ). According to the results, in the mean indicators of resilience, a statistically significant difference between the groups was also not revealed ( $t(87) = -0.32, p = .750$ , Cohen's  $d = -0.08$ ).

However, a statistically significant difference was recorded in the level of self-esteem between children of migrant and non-migrant parents ( $t(87) = 2.19, p = .032$ ). Children of a non-migrant parent had a higher average self-esteem indicator ( $M = 3.05, SD = 0.53$ ) than children of a migrant parent ( $M = 2.78, SD = 0.44$ ). The calculated effect size for this difference yielded a Cohen's  $d = 0.55$ , indicating a medium effect size, which underscores the practical significance of family structure on adolescent self-esteem despite the small subgroup size (Table #3).

**Table #3. Differences Between Children of Migrant and Non-migrant Parents According to Psycho-social Well-being and Psychological Indicators**

Variable	Parent. Migr.	N	M	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Psychological Well-being (PWB)	No	67	3.05	0.53	0.62	87	0.566	0.11
	Yes	22	2.95	1.13				
Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE)	No	67	2.71	0.72	-0.40	87	0.693	-0.09
	Yes	22	2.78	0.81				
Resilience (BRS)	No	67	3.04	1.19	-0.32	87	0.75	-0.08
	Yes	22	2.95	1.13				

Self-esteem (RSES)	No	67	3.05	0.53	2.19	87	.032*	0.55
	Yes	22	2.78	0.44				

**Note.** M – Mean indicator; SD – Standard deviation; t – Independent samples t-test. \*  $p < .05$ . Cohen's  $d$  represents the effect size, where values around 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 correspond to small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

The research results showed that hypothesis H1 was partially confirmed: children of a migrant parent have a significantly lower self-esteem level compared to children of a non-migrant parent, however in the indicators of fear of negative evaluation, resilience, and well-being, statistically significant differences were not recorded.

### Difference According to Sex Among Children of a Migrant Parent

According to the obtained results, on none of the research scales (psychological well-being, fear of negative evaluation, resilience, and self-esteem) was a statistically significant difference between sexes revealed (in all cases  $p > .05$ ) (Table #4).

**Table #4. Sex Differences in Psycho-social Scales Among Children of a Migrant Parent**

Variable	Sex	N	M	SD	T	df	p
Psychological Well-being (PWB)	Girl	12	3.95	0.61	1.68	20	.109
	Boy	10	3.33	1.11			
Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE)	Girl	12	3.00	0.97	1.43	20	.167
	Boy	10	2.52	0.47			
Resilience (BRS)	Girl	12	2.64	1.06	-1.47	18.65	.159
	Boy	10	3.33	1.14			
Self-esteem (RSES)	Girl	12	2.78	0.47	0.12	20	.904
	Boy	10	2.76	0.41			

**Note.** *M* - Mean indicator; *SD* - Standard deviation. *p*-values are presented according to a two-tailed test. Based on Levene's test, for the self-esteem scale \*  $p < .05$  is used.

The mentioned differences were not statistically significantly confirmed. Accordingly, hypothesis **H2** was not confirmed.

### Difference According to Age Among Children of a Migrant Parent

As a result of the independent samples t-test conducted according to age groups, a statistically significant difference was revealed only in the self-esteem indicator ( $t(16.46) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .032$ ). According to this result, adolescents aged 12–14 (Table #5) have on average a higher self-esteem indicator than adolescents aged 15–18.

**Table #5. Comparison of Psycho-social Indicators According to Age Groups**

Scale	Age Group	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Self-esteem (RSES)	12–14 years	13	2.94	0.38	2.34	16.46	0.032*
	15–18 years	9	2.53	0.41			
Psychological Well-being (PWB)	12–14 years	13	3.77	0.79	0.58	13.81	.571
	15–18 years	9	3.52	1.08			
Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE)	12–14 years	13	2.63	0.61	-0.97	11.99	.349
	15–18 years	9	3.00	1.02			
Resilience (BRS)	12–14 years	13	3.06	0.73	-0.93	19.91	.361
	15–18 years	9	3.31	0.53			

**Note.** *M* - Mean indicator; *SD* - Standard deviation. *p*-values are presented according to a two-tailed test. Based on Levene's test, for the self-esteem scale \*  $p < .05$  is used.

From the fact that the indicators of adolescents' psycho-social well-being differ significantly by age, sign only on the self-esteem scale, according to which hypothesis **H3 was confirmed only partially**.

### **Differences Among Migrant Parent's Children According to Frequency of Communication with a Parent**

The independent samples t-test conducted according to the frequency of communication with the migrant parent (rare or frequent) showed that the indicators of psychological well-being, fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem and resilience do not differ statistically significantly between the groups ( $p > .05$ ). It is also noteworthy that adolescents with frequent communication are significantly more numerous compared to adolescents with rare communication (19 and 2) (Table #6).

**Table #6. Comparison of Psycho-social Indicators According to the Frequency of Communication with a Migrant Parent**

Scale	Communication	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Psychological Well-being (PWB)	Rare	2	3.93	0.91			
	Frequent	19	3.60	0.93	0.47	19	.642
Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE)	Rare	2	3.08	1.17			
	Frequent	19	2.78	0.79	0.48	19	.637
Self-esteem (RSES)	Rare	2	2.35	0.63			
	Frequent	19	2.82	0.42	-1.46	19	.160
Resilience (BRS)	Rare	2	3.17	1.41			
	Frequent	19	3.18	0.62	-0.02	19	.986

**Note.** *M* - Mean indicator; *SD* - Standard deviation. *p*-values are presented according to a two-tailed test. Based on Levene's test, for the self-esteem scale \*  $p < .05$  is used.

Since, according to the frequency of communication, the difference in psycho-social indicators did not turn out to be statistically significant, hypothesis **H4 was not confirmed.**

## **5.2. Qualitative Research Results**

Taking into account that the quantitative research results did not reveal significant differences between the research variables, in the second stage of the research, expert interviews were used for the expansion of the interpretation of the quantitative research results and for the purpose of identifying other, potentially significant variables.

### **5.2.1. Emotional Vulnerability**

Psychologists participating in the interview considered the impact of parental migration on children mostly in a negative light, however they emphasized that the degree of impact and manifestations significantly differed according to individual characteristics.

*“Not all children react the same way; psyche, temperament, and life experience matter.”* (Psychologist, 12 years of experience)

Psychologists particularly noted the child's emotional vulnerability: in many cases, it was difficult for children to express feelings of sadness, loneliness, or longing. In some children, emotional withdrawal, communication problems or the risk of bullying from peers manifested, while in others, a decrease in motivation, behavioral instability, and disruption of routine occurred.

In their opinion, academic performance does not unambiguously worsen. Some children manifest a decrease in academic motivation, while others, on the contrary, improve it.

*“At school age they have academic responsibility. By my observation, because the parent has left, children help by studying well”.* (Psychologist, 12 years of experience)

Finally, in all interviews, it was revealed that parental migration still reflects on the child's emotional background, behavioral adaptation, and daily routine.

### **5.2.2. Age and Gender Characteristics**

Psychologists agree that the parent's absence represents a difficulty for children of all ages, however the manifestation of this difficulty changes with age. In small children (especially up to 10 years), emotional difficulties dominate: emotional regulation problems, anxiety, an increase in dependence, or regressive behaviors.

According to one psychologist, the parent's departure at this age is particularly a challenge because:

*“In this period, the sense of security is formed”.* (Psychologist, 12 years of experience)

By the psychologists' explanation, during parental migration, representatives of both sexes experience strong emotional stress, however the forms of expression differ in girls and boys.

*“Boys probably more manifest behavioral difficulties and rebelliousness. With girls, low self-esteem. Everyone is bothered, simply the form of manifestation is different”* (Psychologist, 10 years of experience)

Psychologists agree that girls adapt better.

*“Girls are more mobilized and become focused on studying. They try to care for the departed parent by succeeding in the academic field, but in relationships, girls become more close off. Boys have a hard time in the academic sense; they look outside to fill the lack, and there is a high risk that at the age of adolescence, they become dependent or fall into a dangerous circle.”* (Psychologist, 4 years of experience)

In boys, behavioral reactions are noted: aggression, disobedience, connection with the street environment, and a decrease in academic involvement.

### **5.2.3. Different Impact of Mother's and Father's Migration**

In the psychologists' opinion, a mother's migration is perceived more heavily from the child's side, which is conditioned by the cultural context, since in Georgian families, the mother is mainly responsible for daily needs, routine, school issues, and emotional communication.

*“The mother's role is leading, because she is actively involved in the child's daily life.”* (Psychologist, 10 years of experience)

Father's migration is less heavy because, in the public perception, the father spends less time at home anyway.

*“Discipline, going to school, relationships with classmates' parents are taken by the mother. Children especially lack the mother's involvement and care. The father might not even know the address of the child's school”* (Psychologist, 6 years of experience)

### **5.2.4. The Role of Caregiver and Environment**

All psychologists attached particular importance to the role of the caregiver remaining with the child. In their opinion, the child's adaptation is significantly dependent on the caregiver's emotional availability, consistency, and stability.

*“The caregiver's skills have a very large impact with whom these children are, how realistically they can supervise and care for these children.”* (Psychologist, 7 years of experience)

In their opinion, conflicts often arise when the emigrated parent does not exactly strengthen the caregiver's authority while talking on the phone, and contradicts them, which causes uncertainty in the child.

Psychologists also distinguish hyper-care as one of the challenges in forming the child's behavior.

*“Excessive care can be violence”* (Psychologist, 25 years of experience).

Regarding teachers, several different positions were revealed. Most of the psychologists noted that the school has an important role and tutors, teachers are reliable people. Several psychologists mentioned that children often hear negative comments.

*“Teachers often know how to say: your mother left because of you and you don't study anything, is this how you appreciate her?”* (Psychologist, 6 years of experience)

Despite this, one of the psychologists positively assesses the teacher's being informed and notes that teachers often show greater attention toward the child of a migrant parent.

*“When I have talked with teachers, they make an emphasis on the fact that when going on an excursion, I pay particularly great attention to this child, because the mother is not in Georgia”* (Psychologist, 3 years of experience)

### **5.2.5. Protective and Risk Factors**

According to the evaluation of the psychologists participating in the interview, in the process of children's adaptation, a particularly important role is the family's emotional environment and the child's emotional support.

*“The consistent attitude of family members, support, and the caregiver's capability...”* (Psychologist, 4 years of experience).

By the psychologists' explanation, frequent and high-quality communication with the emigrated parent becomes particularly important, which decreases the child's sense of alienation and creates an emotionally safer environment.

Respondents also noted several hindering factors for the child's adaptation. The most widespread opinion among psychologists was the parent's sudden and unprepared departure.

*“Prior preparation, that the child knows where, how and in what way the parent is going and when they will return”* (Psychologist, 25 years of experience)

### **5.2.6. The Importance of Psychological Services**

In the interviews, it was revealed that the availability of psychological help in regions is particularly limited. Stigmas represent a challenge: both parents and children often think that applying to a psychologist is possible only during “heavy problems,” which hinders timely intervention.

*“Stigma exists in regions anyway; if a child goes to a psychologist, it means there is a serious problem, both adults and children think so.”* (Psychologist, 4 years of experience)

Added to this are long-term queues for service, because of which early help often cannot be achieved, and the child's condition may become complicated.

Also, according to the psychologists' evaluation, to alleviate the impact of migration, it is necessary that the child be prepared in advance for the parent's departure. It is considered desirable that a professional psychologist lead this process.

*“Jointly, preparing all family members before the parent goes into migration and consultation with a specialist before going.”* (Psychologist, 6 years of experience)

Furthermore, maintaining a stable routine for children represents one of the main recommendations from the psychologists' side.

Psychologists also recommend the creation of such programs or groups where children with similar experiences will be able to share emotions and ways of coping with longing with each other.

*“A program or circle should be created where children with similar experience will share emotions and ways of coping with longing with each other”* (Psychologist, 7 years of experience)

## **6. Research Findings and Analysis of Results**

Quantitative data did not reveal a sharp difference between groups in demographic, psycho-social well-being, and resilience indicators. This trend may be explained by the fact that in the selection, in the migrant parents' subgroup ( $n = 22$ ), in the majority of cases ( $n = 13$ ), the father was in migration. In the Georgian cultural context, when the mother remains as the primary caregiver, the father's migration represents a relatively smaller psychological challenge for the child, which promotes the maintenance of well-being (Graham & Jordan, 2011; UNICEF, 2020). In this same context, it is also interesting that a statistically significant difference was revealed only in the self-esteem indicator between children of migrant and non-migrant parents. One explanation for this may be that self-esteem represents a particularly sensitive psychosocial indicator toward family changes (Cui et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2017), which is in agreement with the quantitative results obtained in the present study.

Despite the fact that within the framework of the quantitative research, the data did not reveal a statistically significant difference between children of migrant and non-migrant parents in well-being and resilience indicators, qualitative analysis reveals adolescents' deep emotional distress and distinguishes their condition according to sex and age as well. The results may be explained by several fundamental factors:

Expert interviews show that there is a difference not in the intensity of distress, but in the form of its manifestation. In boys, externalized reactions dominate, such as aggression and “rebelliousness,” while in girls, internalized problems: withdrawal and low self-esteem. Standardized scales, which are oriented on the total score, cannot capture these qualitative differences. Furthermore, the age difference, which could not be confirmed in the process of quantitative research, may be explained by the selection. The experts emphasized how important the child's age is and that the period of early and middle childhood is more vulnerable. Experts' opinions are in agreement with existing studies (Wang et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2021).

The qualitative insights from the expert interviews provide a valuable conceptual link to the phenomenon of 'frozen grief' or 'ambiguous loss' (Boss, 2007), where a parent is physically absent but remains psychologically salient in the child's daily life. While these narrative reports strongly imply that such configurations create emotional uncertainty, it is crucial to note that our direct empirical data cannot definitively prove the universal presence of ambiguous loss across the entire sample. Rather, this framework serves as a highly plausible theoretical interpretation that helps explain the qualitative distress voiced by the experts, bridging the gap between localized experiences and established family systems theories. The high indicator of resilience recorded in the quantitative research may reflect not real well-being, but emotional suppression or an adaptive mechanism that creates "superficial stability". One of the most important findings of the study is the dominance of father's migration in the selection (13 fathers - 6 mothers, and 3 - both). In the Georgian cultural context, where the mother's emotional role is central, her remaining in the country appears as a "buffer" protective factor (Antia et al., 2022).

Despite the fact that the H4 hypothesis (frequency of communication) could not be statistically confirmed due to the small selection (N=2 with rare contact), qualitative data and the theoretical framework unanimously recognize regular communication as a resilience-promoting factor. This is described both in the studies of transnational families and in the resilience literature (Mazzucato et al., 2015). The mentioned data echoes attachment and family systems theories, where: the child's emotional security depends on the parent's emotional availability and the continuity of the relationship (Bowlby, 1980; Cassidy, 2013); the importance of the stability of caregiving roles in the child's adaptation process is emphasized (Minuchin, 1974; Bowen, 1978).

The maintained routine, the caregiver's resourcefulness, and the school's role were revealed as important protective factors in adolescents' adaptation, since the support of teachers and tutors promotes psycho-social well-being even in conditions where parents are not by their side (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; UNICEF, 2020). Regarding risk factors, as in other existing studies, emphasis was placed on the importance of the child's prior preparation and the scarcity of communication (UNICEF, 2020). When the child cannot prepare and cannot realize how long the parent's absence will last, at this time sadness and the feeling of loneliness take on an endless form and are reflected in the feeling of abandonment (Boss, 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

Thus, the study confirms that the impact of parental migration on adolescents is multi-layered, and its assessment only with quantitative indicators cannot reflect the emotional dynamics that take place in the adolescent's internal world.

## **7. Research Limitations**

Despite the fact that the present research provided significant information on the psycho-social condition of the children of migrant parents, several methodological limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results:

1. **Small Subgroup and Statistical Power:** One of the primary limitations of the research is the small sample size of the migrant parents' subgroup (N = 22 out of 89 participants). This specific

constraint significantly reduces the statistical power of the quantitative analyses (such as the independent samples t-test), making it difficult to detect subtle or nuanced differences between the groups. Consequently, the lack of statistically significant differences in variables like psychological well-being, resilience, and fear of negative evaluation must be interpreted with caution, as it may be an artifact of low statistical power rather than the absence of a real effect. This imbalance is particularly visible in the context of communication frequency, where only two respondents were recorded in the rare contact group, severely limiting the sensitivity of the t-test.

2. **Gender Imbalance in Migration Patterns:** Within the framework of the selection, the majority of migrants were fathers (13 cases out of 22), while the mother's migration was recorded in only 6 cases. In the Georgian cultural context, where the mother traditionally serves as the primary caregiver, the father's migration, under the condition of the mother remaining in Georgia, is generally associated with less acute psychological risk. Accordingly, the stability and high scores of the quantitative data may be heavily conditioned by the existence of the mother acting as an emotional "buffer" and protective factor, rather than reflecting the absolute safety of parental migration in general.
3. **Geographical Scope and Generalizability:** The research was conducted strictly within the scope of the capital city, Tbilisi. This geographical limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to adolescents living in various regions of Georgia. In regional and rural areas, macro-level factors such as socio-economic constraints, community dynamics, and accessibility to professional psychological services are significantly lower, which might alter how left-behind youth experience and manifest psycho-social distress

## **8. Conclusion**

The findings suggest that within the Georgian cultural context, where maternal caregiving roles are traditionally centralized, the mother's stable presence may function as an emotional buffer, potentially mitigating some of the stress associated with paternal migration. This contextual dynamic offers a plausible explanation for why the quantitative well-being indicators of these adolescents remained within normal statistical boundaries despite parental absence. However, due to the descriptive nature of the qualitative data and the small sample size, these observations should be treated as exploratory hypotheses rather than definitive causal links.

Consequently, this study concludes that:

- Self-esteem appears to be a highly sensitive psycho-social indicator that may directly respond to family structural changes ( $p = .032$ );
- Quantitative scores alone might mask underlying qualitative complexities, indicating that a mixed-methods approach is preferable for capturing subtle emotional dynamics in left-behind youth;

- The emotional competence and resources of the remaining caregiver are potentially vital components in shaping the adolescent's adaptation process, underscoring the need for broader, systemic support.

The obtained results create a basis for the development of targeted psycho-social interventions, which will be oriented not only on the strengthening of adolescents but also of the remaining caregivers.

### **Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized artificial intelligence (AI) technology solely for the purpose of language translation and stylistic refinement to ensure the clarity and academic precision of the text.

Technology Used: Gemini (Large Language Model developed by Google).

The tool was applied to assist in translating sections of the text and improving the overall linguistic flow and readability of the English manuscript.

The authors maintained full control over the writing process, thoroughly reviewed and edited all AI-assisted translations, and take full responsibility for the final content, integrity, and scientific accuracy of the research paper.

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