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GLOBAL HANDBOOKS IN
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH

The Handbook of Journalism and Emotion

The Handbook of Journalism and Emotion

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**María T. Soto-Sanfiel
Virpi Salojärvi**

WILEY

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Soto-Sanfiel, María T. 1967–editor | Salojärvi, Virpi 1979–editor

Title: The handbook of journalism and emotion / edited by María T.

Soto-Sanfiel, Virpi Salojärvi.

Description: First edition. | Hoboken, NY : Wiley, 2026. |

Series: Global handbooks in media and communication research | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025023133 (print) | LCCN 2025023134 (ebook) | ISBN

9781394169382 cloth | ISBN 9781394169399 paperback | ISBN 9781394169405

adobe pdf | ISBN 9781394169412 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Journalism—Social aspects | Emotions in mass media |

Emotions—Political aspects

Classification: LCC PN4749 .H28 2025 (print) | LCC PN4749 (ebook) | DDC

302.23—dc23 / eng / 20250709

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025023133>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025023134>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © South_agency/Getty Images

Set in 10/12pt Dante MT Std by Straive, Pondicherry, India

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Section 4

Responses

Organizations, Journalists
and Audiences

Igartua, J. J. (2026). Emotions as audience responses and effects: a media psychology perspective. In M. T. Soto-Sanfiel & V. Salojärvi (Eds.), *Handbook of journalism and emotions: Theory, production, content, and responses* (pp. 367-377). Wiley.

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Emotions as Audience Responses and Effects A Media Psychology Perspective

Juan-José Igartua

Introduction

Journalism requires us to address a series of reporting requirements and to answer the six classic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? To report any event to the public, it is essential to organize and present news in a way that addresses these fundamental questions: what happened, how and why did it happen, where did it take place, when did it happen, and who was involved? The news must collect factual data and answer these six major questions to provide people with information. This news product is set up in such a way that those who consume news will gain a firmer grasp on the world in which they live, current events, and the political, social, and economic processes occurring locally, nationally, and internationally (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019).

This emphasis on defining news as an information source has meant that the main theoretical approaches to understanding the news's impact on people have focused on cognitive variables: News influence people's perception of the importance of certain issues, actors, or events (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002), and it affects the understanding of social issues (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Moreover, the two main theories on the effects that news consumption has on people (Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory) explain said impact by drawing upon concepts related to cognitive processes, such as accessibility, priming, or the applicability effect (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; Scheufele, 1999, 2000). In other words, it is understood that the main dependent variables (namely, the *effects* of news consumption on individuals) and the most relevant mediating mechanisms (variables that explain *why* these effects occur) function at the cognitive level.

The Handbook of Journalism and Emotion, First Edition. Edited by María T. Soto-Sanfiel and Virpi Salojärvi.

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However, news also have an emotional dimension or a tone that explains why people experience emotions of varying intensity when exposed to it. Emotions play a fundamental role in people's lives. An emotion is an internal state experienced as an evaluative reaction to a relevant stimulus in the environment (Frijda, 1988). Emotions vary in valence (being positive or negative) and intensity. In addition, emotional reactions arise and pass quickly and are usually tied to a specific cause (Scherer, 2000). Emotions have five components: (1) evaluative or appraisal component, indicating that an emotion is associated with a particular evaluation of the meaning of the situation that triggered it; (2) neurophysiological, given that emotions manifest through physiological reactions such as activation or arousal; (3) motivational or action-preparedness, because emotions are associated with different action tendencies (for example, fear is associated with a flight response, whereas anger is linked to a fight response); (4) expressive, since emotions are made evident in facial expressions and in specific ways of speaking or intoning the voice, and (5) subjective feeling, which refers to the psychological experience of feeling a specific emotion (Scherer, 2005).

Emotions are inherent in news content. The news often presents dramatic stories; features testimonies of individuals who have been accident victims; shows images of riots; or reports on social upheavals, natural disasters, or the consequences of armed conflicts such as wars or terrorist attacks. In other words, news production incorporates an emotional dimension that is intertwined with the delivery of factual information and with the perspective or frame adopted when creating the news product. For example, a news item reporting on the arrival of immigrants may address the migrants' own suffering due to the difficulties they face on their journey, or it may put the spotlight on how migratory pressure affects the host population. In both cases, an emotional component is incorporated while a specific event (the arrival of immigrants) is reported on, either focusing on human interest or alluding to the economic consequences, respectively.

In addition, emotions are processes of reception, that is, psychological processes of an affective nature that occur during news consumption. First, they act as outcomes or dependent variables, which implies that the consequences of news consumption go beyond understanding the events or assessing their news relevance: news also provoke emotional effects, and therefore, their study is relevant (Brader et al., 2008; Graf et al., 2020; Gross, 2008). In this sense, the technological advance in news production (the shift from *storytelling* to *story living*) coincides with the rise of immersive journalism, and one of the most notable consequences of this development is the emotional impact on audiences (Greber et al., 2023). In addition, the emotions that people experience when exposed to news content can act as mediating mechanisms that help explain the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects that the news generates. For example, negative emotions elicited by news stories reporting dramatic events involving people belonging to stigmatized groups (such as reporting on a crime committed by a person described as Muslim) may help explain why such news frames influence news consumers, reinforcing a negative attitude toward Islam (Saleem et al., 2017).

This chapter discusses theoretical perspectives on emotions and the news's reception and effect from a Media Psychology perspective. The underlying premise of our discussion is that, in contrast to the conventional view (of journalistic products as vessels of information that have an impact on cognitive processes), news elicit different kinds of emotions in audiences. Therefore, emotions may be *dependent variables* (i.e., affective reactions experienced by individuals when consuming news), beyond the classical variables related to cognitive effects, such as acquiring information, increasing knowledge about the world, or understanding social issues. In addition, it is believed that such emotional reactions can explain the news's cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral impact on people. Therefore, emotions are conceived of as reception responses to news exposure and can play a dual role: acting as dependent variables and as mediating processes or mechanisms.

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Discrete Emotions

Classical approaches to the study of the news's impact on people are supported by two important theories of media effects: Agenda Setting and Framing (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019; Walter et al., 2018). These theories emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, within the tradition of *strong media effects*, hand in hand with other relevant theories, such as cultivation theory or the spiral of silence, all of them concerned with the media's long-term cognitive effects on people (Vorderer et al., 2019).

Initially, Agenda-Setting Theory connected the world of news with politics (Tsfati & Walter, 2019). From this perspective, the news sets the public agenda by highlighting certain information and/or social actors at the expense of others, which means that certain issues come to be perceived as more important. In this case, accessibility acts as the mediating mechanism that explains why repeated exposure to certain information leads people to perceive the most frequently discussed topics as more important. The consequence of certain public issues being chronically accessible at a cognitive level is that they also influence opinions about certain social actors. For example, stressing in the news that immigration is a problem (by frequently publishing news stories that connect immigration with a lack of public security) can result in certain political candidates being rated better or worse in an electoral campaign context depending on their public position on immigration. If news stories on immigration dominate the news scene, it is likely that candidates with harsh rhetoric regarding immigration (those belonging to extreme right-wing parties) will receive better ratings from citizens than political candidates who demonstrate a more lukewarm viewpoint when it comes to this issue. This effect could be explained by the priming mechanism (Scheufele, 2000).

Framing Theory has emphasized that the way in which news about a topic, event, or social actor is framed conditions perceptions and attitudes. News not only presents factual information but also always adopts a perspective. In this sense, a news report is not a random set of facts; rather, news stories should be described as having an organizing theme that frames the facts. When we allude to the concept of a news frame, we are referring to the way in which the communicator approaches a subject, sets an agenda of attributes, and uses a certain angle. Thus, a news frame provides a specific perspective and invites the individual to perceive a given topic or event from a particular perspective.

Different typologies for classifying news frames have been established. Iyengar (1991) differentiates between *thematic frames*, where news stories present information abstractly and provide background and explanations, and *episodic frames*, which focus on specific cases in event-oriented news stories. In contrast, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) propose a typology of five kinds of news frames: conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences, and morality. However, there are also inductive approaches that give rise to news frame typologies that are specific to each topic or issue addressed in the news (Matthes & Khoring, 2008). For instance, Van Gorp (2005) refers to two types of news frames in the context of news coverage of immigration: The *victim frame* portrays immigrants as victims in need of help from the host society, while the *intruder frame* depicts immigrants as intruders causing problems and posing a threat to the host country.

Research on Framing Theory tries not only to identify and describe different kinds of news frames but also to evaluate the effects they have on audiences. The analysis of news frame effects is known as the framing effect, that is, the change that occurs in opinions and attitudes owing to subtle alterations in the definition of a problem (Scheufele, 2000). For example, it has been observed that emphasizing in a news item that immigration has increased crime in the country (conflict framing) versus emphasizing that it has led to an economic improvement in the host

society (economic consequences framing) has an impact on attitudes toward immigration and beliefs about what immigration is and its role in society (Igartua et al., 2011).

Although traditional approaches in Agenda-Setting and Framing research initially relegated the study of emotional processes to the background, there has recently been an increase in the number of studies on the affective influence of news (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Lecheler et al., 2013, 2015; Miller, 2007; Nabi, 2003; Schuck & Feinholdt, 2015). These studies have focused on demonstrating that news have an emotional impact and, more importantly, that the emotions elicited by exposure to news on different topics, or constructed with different framing, act as mediating mechanisms. For instance, news stories portraying immigration issues in a negative light often resulted in heightened unfavorable opinions toward immigrants among audiences, and this outcome (*dependent variable*) is attributed to the arousal of negative emotions (*mediating variable*) during news exposure (Lecheler et al., 2015).

Studying mediating variables is central to research on media effects because it allows us to make headway in regard to the explanation of *how* or *why* a certain effect is produced (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2009). Studying mediating processes has been intrinsically linked to important theoretical and methodological developments. The first pertinent aspect is that media effects are currently understood to be indirect (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). According to the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), “media effects are indirect; three media response states mediate the relationship between media use and media effects” (p. 227). This means that the effects of a given independent variable on a dependent variable can be explained by the *indirect effect* of the former variable on the latter through one or more mechanisms. According to this model, the cognitive, emotional, or physiological processes that occur during exposure to a media message act as mediating mechanisms. The second significant step forward is methodological in nature and has particularly occurred since the publication of Andrew F. Hayes’s work and the development of the PROCESS macro for mediation analysis (Hayes, 2022; Igartua & Hayes, 2021). Chan et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review on the use of mediation in communication research, analyzing a sample of 397 articles published in the *Journal of Communication*, *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Research*, *Communication Research*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, and *Media Psychology* between 1996 and 2017. The study showed that there had been an exponential growth in the number of articles that used mediation analysis: In 1999, only 2% of journal articles included some form of mediation analysis; this increased to 7% in 2007, and then to 22% in 2017. This analysis is in line with the study conducted by Walter et al. (2018), which concludes that research on communication increasingly employs the analysis of indirect effects (mediation).

The analysis of indirect effects and mediating mechanisms is also present in current research on the effects of news exposure on individuals. Recent studies on Agenda-Setting and Framing assert that the emotions that people experience when exposed to news are significant processes when it comes to understanding the overall effect of news on cognitive and attitudinal processes. In this case, it is believed that discrete emotions can act as dependent and mediating variables. For example, the emotional impact individuals experience due to exposure to news serves as the dependent variable, but this emotional experience also functions as a mediating variable explaining the influence of news consumption on cognitive or attitudinal processes.

Discrete emotions (joy, sadness, fear, anger, contempt, surprise, and disgust) are considered core, modal, or primary emotions because they are presumed to have a specific neurophysiological basis, are triggered by different stimuli (both internal and external), are linked to specific cognitive evaluation patterns, are universal (observed across cultures), and are manifested through characteristic facial expressions (Ekman, 1999; Izard, 1992). Discrete emotions vary in intensity, duration, valence (positive or negative), and physiological arousal (Scherer, 2005). In addition, discrete emotions influence cognitive processes, decision-making, and behaviors

(Izard, 2007). They also play a fundamental role in how people process information and establish judgments about social or political issues and, for that reason, have been considered mediating mechanisms in research on news's cognitive and attitudinal effects (Gross, 2008; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019).

The affective impact hypothesis has been put forward to explain how the *Agenda-Setting effect* is produced (Iyengar & Kinder, 1985). According to this perspective, it is believed that the vivid and dramatic presentation of news content regarding social problems has an affective impact on individuals. Experiencing emotions such as anger, sadness, or fear during exposure to a news item could have a direct effect on the importance that subjects assign to different social problems. Likewise, it is suggested that emotional experience could have an indirect effect on the judgment process. The affective impact would be associated with increased attention to the stimulus (the dramatic information about the social problem), which in turn would influence the formation of political judgments on different issues. According to this perspective, it is believed that discrete emotions (especially negative ones, such as fear, anger, or sadness) can help explain news exposure's effects on the perception of social issues or importance judgments, that is, which are the most important problems or issues facing the country (Miller, 2007).

Studies based on the perspective of Framing Theory have generally focused on determining how the presentation of an issue or event in the news influences people's opinions; that is, how citizens come to understand an event or political issue may depend, at least in part, on how the issue is framed in the news. Research on the explanatory mechanisms of the framing effect has given fundamental importance to cognitive processes, drawing on concepts such as accessibility, applicability (belief importance change), or the generation of new beliefs (belief content change; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). According to this perspective, it is thus believed that news frames can increase the cognitive salience of certain prior beliefs (which become more accessible in people's minds), modify the importance of certain beliefs when it comes to understanding an issue (through an *adjustment* of existing beliefs), or introduce new beliefs about an issue.

Current developments in research on news framing effects are focused on determining whether different frames also generate different patterns of emotional response and whether the emotions experienced by people when faced with news framed from different perspectives can act as mediating variables that explain attitudinal effects (Lecheler et al., 2013). From this perspective, it is suggested that news frames can elicit emotional reactions in people, and this, in turn, can influence attitudes and beliefs about a particular topic (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019). For example, immigration may be framed in the news by emphasizing the negative consequences for the host society (immigrants as an economic, cultural, or security threat) or by presenting immigrants as victims who require humane and sympathetic treatment. Clearly, these types of news frames stimulate different emotional reactions: the threat frame typically triggers anger, whereas the victimization frame tends to evoke more feeling of sadness and compassion. In addition, experiencing different emotions during news exposure may explain the effect that news framing of immigration (threat versus victimization) has on opinions toward immigration (Lecheler et al., 2015).

Inspired by the Story: Self-Transcendent Emotions and the Effect of Positive News

There is a bias toward producing negative news (negativity bias): News content editors believe that news about negative events engages audiences more than news about positive events (Galician & Pasternack, 1987). In addition, negative news more easily catches attention and

produces greater physiological arousal than positive news (Robertson et al., 2023; Soroka et al., 2019). That said, it has also been observed that negative news reduces helping behavior, decreases tolerance and perceived community benevolence, elicits more negative evaluations of unfamiliar people or outsiders, causes depression and helplessness, increases distrust of political leaders, and generates disinterest in civic affairs (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018; Galician & Vestre, 1987; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Veitch & Griffitt, 1976).

Journalism can adopt alternative approaches to push news production beyond the “disease model” that underlies traditional journalism (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). In such a context, the concept of constructive journalism (also called testimony journalism or solutions journalism) is an emerging form of journalism that uses positive psychology and positive media psychology to focus on news production. Constructive journalism is the successor of civic journalism, being based on the idea of integrating journalism into the democratic process (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017). The pioneers of civic journalism (also known as public journalism) believed that the media should not only inform the public but also have to engage citizens and stimulate public debate (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Constructive journalism assumes this mission and makes counteracting negativity bias in the production of news its objective.

As mentioned earlier, constructive journalism is supported by the development of positive media psychology, the field of study dedicated to examining the processes associated with the use of media that lead to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contribute to individuals’ well-being (Raney et al., 2020). In short, positive media psychology is an approach within positive psychology that focuses on the study of how the media and social networks can have a positive impact on people’s well-being. In other words, positive media psychology is an emerging and growing field that explores the positive influence of media (Stever, 2022). In this context, self-transcendent emotions – which refers to a set of emotions that transcend the individual self and push us beyond our limits, connecting us to something greater – become relevant (Oliver et al., 2018). Research has shown that experiencing self-transcendent emotions can have significant health benefits for individuals (Pizarro et al., 2021). In addition, self-transcendent emotions – being fundamentally driven by a concern for improving the well-being of others – also promote prosocial behavior (Stellar et al., 2017).

Self-transcendent emotions differ from positive hedonic emotions (those related solely to pleasure and joy) in that they do not focus primarily on the self or personal goals. Self-transcendent emotions foster an openness to others and are “other oriented.” The most significant self-transcendent emotions are elevation, admiration, gratitude, hope, awe, and love (*kama muta*) (Raney et al., 2020).

Elevation is an emotion that stems from witnessing acts of kindness, compassion, or altruism; it is associated with experiencing a sense of warmth and greater faith in humanity and a desire to act more positively. *Admiration* is a similar emotional experience, but it is usually triggered by observing or witnessing extraordinary skills, talent, or achievements in other people. *Gratitude* is the emotion experienced when a person appreciates and acknowledges what they have achieved in life, as well as when the individual receives kind actions from others. *Hope* is the feeling associated with the belief that things can change for the better, whether in our own lives, in the lives of others, or in the world as a whole. Such emotion provides the *emotional fuel* for an individual to persevere in the face of obstacles. *Awe* is an emotion of deep admiration, wonder, and reverence experienced when confronted with something extraordinary, majestic, or inspiring. When a person experiences awe while witnessing something immense, they feel small and insignificant. Finally, *love* (understood as *kama muta*, which in Sanskrit means “to be moved by love”) is a positive emotion that stems from a person feeling deeply *touched* by a moment of genuine human connection (Blomster et al., 2020; Ji & Raney, 2020; Stellar et al., 2017).

Research has confirmed that the media and social networks can trigger self-transcendent emotions (Oliver et al., 2018) and that people seek out content that stimulates these types of experiences (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019). For example, inspiring stories of people overcoming challenges can evoke admiration and compassion in viewers. Nature documentaries can awaken a sense of connection with the natural world, generating emotions of gratitude and love for the Earth. From this perspective, by placing the focus on solutions to problems (showing how individuals, communities, or institutions are addressing and resolving a given challenge), news that is based on the *positive side of the event* (despite reporting negative events such as health crises or emergency situations) can also inspire, motivate, and encourage a more balanced and constructive view of the world and look more to the future than to the past.

By telling encouraging or moving stories, positive news can elicit self-transcendent emotions. The testimony of a survivor of a natural disaster showing courage and bravery, highlighting the virtuousness of their behavior, can elicit self-transcendent emotions such as elevation, admiration, hope, or awe (Raney et al., 2020). Therefore, when the expression “positive news” is used, it refers to news that highlights events, stories, or aspects of current affairs that have a positive or inspirational tone. The purpose of positive news is to counteract the saturation of negative news that often dominates the media and to provide a balance by offering stories that can inspire or motivate people, elicit positive emotions, and encourage a more optimistic view of the world.

Restorative narratives are stories or accounts centered around resilience, recovery, and rebuilding following trauma, adversity, or crisis (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). These narratives, upon which constructive journalism is founded, have been shown to evoke self-transcendent emotions in audiences and promote prosocial behaviors, such as altruism and the desire to help. In addition, they can reduce stereotypes and prejudice, inspire a sense of connection to humanity, expand kindness and gratitude (by going viral through social networks owing to widespread sharing), *set or establish the agenda* around more benign and harmonious portrayals of problems, and ultimately cultivate a *kind-world syndrome* (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018; Raney et al., 2020).¹ Moreover, self-transcendent emotions have been found to act as mediating mechanisms for such prosocial effects of positive news (Krämer et al., 2017; Swijtink et al., 2022).

In short, news created with a positive tone, focused on problem-solving and on the future, can counteract the effect of news created only in a negative tone (negative news) and promote a *well-being model of the world*, disconnected from the *disease model of the world* that was characteristic of journalism in earlier times (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017).

Conclusions

Our work navigates through pivotal theories in the study of the relationship between news, its production, and its effects on individuals from the perspective of media psychology. Expanding upon conventional theories that primarily highlight the adverse effects of news consumption

¹ The concept of *kind-world syndrome* is defined in contrast to the *mean-world syndrome*. Research in cultivation literature suggests that due to the prevalence of crime and violence depicted on television, heavy viewers are more inclined than lighter viewers to perceive the real world as harsh and menacing, a place where trust is lacking and where they themselves are more likely to become victims of crime. This phenomenon has been labeled the mean-world syndrome by cultivation researchers. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that repeated exposure to media portraying a different worldview, as one characterized by kindness, helpfulness, tolerance, decency, and interconnectedness, could similarly foster a more optimistic perspective of the world, leading to what we might call a kind-world syndrome (Raney et al., 2020).

(Agenda Setting and Framing), our work also delves into the perspective of constructive journalism. In this context, we explore how experts utilize emotions to counter the bias toward negative news while also examining the significance of self-transcendent emotions in media reception.

Journalism plays a fundamental role in social life. Thanks to the work of journalists, the public gains an understanding of reality and becomes aware of the main issues affecting their lives at the local, national, or international level. However, news is not only a means of information; it also has an emotional dimension. Emotions are not *side effects* of news consumption but rather important reception processes that can act as dependent variables and as mediating mechanisms of the effects of news.

Current research on Agenda-Setting has highlighted the importance of discrete emotions as explanatory mechanisms for the effects of news exposure on the perceived importance of social issues (Miller, 2007). Current developments in research on news framing effects are focused on determining whether different frames also generate different patterns of emotional response and whether the emotions experienced by people when exposed to news framed with different perspectives can act as mediating variables that explain attitudinal effects (Lecheler et al., 2015). This field of study is relevant because it enables an understanding of the role of emotions in explaining the effects of exposure to news with different frames. One area that could be explored more deeply in the future is the analysis of emotional processes associated with the effects of *fake news*, as these types of content are designed to evoke strong emotional reactions in audiences (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Our work concludes with a reflection on the power of news to inspire individuals, to induce self-transcendent emotions, and the role that constructive journalism plays in all of this (see also the chapter authored by Parks, 2026). In essence, constructive journalism seeks to counteract the negativity bias in news production and promote people's well-being through more positive and uplifting news. Its connection to research on positive media psychology and the study of self-transcendent emotions has, in recent years, become an alternative to the *disease model of the world* characteristic of traditional journalism (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017). Using this perspective, the news is based around the *positive side of the event*, focusing on solutions to problems. Self-transcendent emotions play an important role in this type of journalism, which inspires audiences and promotes a more balanced and constructive view of the world. It aims to *set or establish the agenda* around more benign and harmonious interpretations of problems and promote a *kind-world syndrome* (Raney et al., 2020).

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