The Ethical Evaluation of Social Work Academic Publications with Children and Youth: Meta Analysis*

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Abstract

Aim: This research aimed to examine the adherence to ethical principles and standards in academic social work publications focusing on children and youth.

Method: To achieve the research objective, the meta-analysis method was employed. Out of 737 studies, including articles and theses, 192 studies met the inclusion criteria. Using the predetermined coding method, the studies were analyzed based on their form and content characteristics, their adherence to ethical principles and standards was evaluated. Effect sizes were then calculated accordingly. For this calculation, the group difference meta-analysis method was applied, which compares naturally occurring groups, such as men and women, to determine standardized effect sizes. Additionally, Hedges's g value was utilized for effect size estimation, and the random effects model was chosen to account for variability across studies.

Results: The study found that Hedges's g value indicated a small effect size across perceptions. This finding suggests that the difference in ethical principles and standards between male and female participants is minimal, indicating no significant gender-based difference in adherence to ethical principles.

Conclusion: The findings of this research indicate that, in the 192 studies analyzed, researchers did not specifically focus on ethical principles and standards tailored to children and young people. Instead, their studies primarily adhered to general scientific research ethics.

Keywords: Meta analysis, child and youth, research, ethic.

Çocuk ve Gençlik Temalı Sosyal Hizmet Akademik Yayınlarının Etik Değerlendirilmesi: Meta Analiz

Öz

Amaç: Bu araştırma çocuk ve gençlik temalı sosyal hizmet akademik yayınlarının etik ilke ve standartlara uygunluğunun incelenmesini ve değerlendirilmesini amaçlamıştır.

Yöntem: Araştırmanın amacı doğrultusunda meta analiz yöntemi tercih edilmiş ve örneklem olarak makale ve tezlerden oluşan 737 adet çalışma içerisinden dahil edilme kriterlerine uyum sağlayan 192 adet çalışma belirlenmiştir. Belirlenen kodlama yöntemi ile çalışmalar biçim ve içerik özelliklerine göre incelenmiş, etik ilke ve standartlara uygunlukları değerlendirilmiş ve etki büyüklükleri hesaplanmıştır. Bu hesaplama sürecinde grup farklılığı meta analiz yöntemi kullanılmış ve bu modelde standartlaştırılmış etki büyüklüğünü ortaya koyabilmek adına kadın-erkek gibi doğal gruplar oluşturulmuştur. Ayrıca etki büyüklüğünün hesaplanması için Hedges's g değeri benimsenmiş ve rastgele etki modeli tercih edilmiştir.

Bulgular: Araştırmada her bir örneklem grubundaki etki büyüklüğüne bakıldığında Hedges's g değerinin küçük düzeyde olduğu bulgusu elde edilmiştir. Bu bulgu ise çalışmalarda yer alan kız ve erkek katılımcılar

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arasında etik ilke ve standartlar bağımlı değişkeni bağlamında farkın boyutunun oldukça küçük olduğunu ve cinsiyetler arasında anlamlı bir farklılık olmadığını göstermiştir.

Sonuç: Araştırma sonucunda toplam 192 adet çalışmada yer alan araştırmacıların çocuk ve gençlere özgü etik ilke ve standartlar bağlamında çalışmadıkları genel olarak bilimsel araştırma etiğine özgü çalışmalar yaptıkları görülmüştür.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Meta analiz, çocuk ve genç, araştırma, etik.

Introduction

Social work is an applied discipline aimed at ensuring that individuals at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of society attain minimum living standards and enhanced social functionality[1]. Professionals who utilize their knowledge, skills, and values to make professional interventions toward this goal are defined as social workers. Social workers must adhere to ethical principles while performing professional interventions in roles such as case managers, advocates, facilitators, planners, policy developers, and educators[2]. This raises the issue of ethical principles and standards that underpin social work ethics. In broad terms, social work ethics comprise moral guidelines that direct social workers to act in accordance with the profession's established ethical principles and standards[3-5]. By adhering to these ethical standards, professionals can navigate challenges in practice and adopt a value-based approach, ensuring human-centered service delivery in the face of ethical dilemmas. However, ethical considerations in social work are not confined to practice alone; they are equally critical in professional research. Social work research, which aims to solve problems, remains client-oriented, and generates practice-oriented knowledge, serves to address the challenges faced by individuals, families, groups, and communities. It also contributes to the advancement of professional practice by employing systematic research methods[6-8]. These studies emphasize the socio-cultural contexts of individuals, rely on theoretical foundations, and facilitate significant changes throughout the intervention process. They also highlight the participation of disadvantaged groups who lack minimum living conditions[7]. Given the involvement of disadvantaged groups, ethical principles and standards become even more crucial in social work research[9]. A review of the literature identifies various disadvantaged groups, with children and young people receiving particular attention due to their vulnerability[10,11]. Because of their developmental characteristics, children and young people are among the most at-risk populations, facing challenges such as neglect, abuse, and deprivation of basic needs. Consequently, as in many other disciplines, social work also prioritizes addressing the fundamental issues affecting children and young people[12-16]. In all these studies, researchers must remain cognizant of potential harm and implement measures to mitigate risks. Therefore, adherence to ethical principles and standards is imperative for all researchers working with children and young people. This raises the question of whether a universally accepted ethical framework exists for studies involving these populations. A review of the literature suggests that while general scientific ethical guidelines are commonly referenced in research involving children and young people, studies explicitly focusing on ethical principles and standards for these populations remain limited. Among the key references in this area are the guidelines published by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and the "Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC)" principles, developed by the International

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Children's Center in collaboration with the Delegation of the European Union to Türkiye. Additionally, several other studies discuss the ethical principles, standards, and general rules that should be observed in research involving children and young people[17-20].

In conclusion, this study aims to assess the extent to which academic research focusing on children and young people adheres to ethical principles and standards. To achieve this objective, relevant academic studies in the field will first be identified, followed by a meta-analytic evaluation. The research will also provide insights into the degree of adherence to ethical principles and standards in studies involving children and young people. Specifically, it will examine whether ethical principles evolve in response to changing conditions and whether a universal set of ethical standards can be established for research involving children and young people. This is particularly important given the dynamic nature of social work ethics, which continues to evolve in parallel with professional practices. The study seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent do social work research studies adhere to ethical principles and standards related to children and young people? How are these ethical principles and standards distributed in terms of gender differences? And do these principles evolve in response to changing conditions?

The study is significant as it represents the first comprehensive meta-analysis in Türkiye focusing on ethical evaluations related to children and youth in the field of social work. It underscores the importance of considering not only scientific research ethics but also specific ethical principles and standards relevant to children and young people in social work research. This approach will enable social work professionals to conduct their practices more effectively within an ethical framework. Furthermore, the study's use of appropriate statistical methods, such as the random effects model, accounting for the heterogeneous data structure, enhances the reliability and accuracy of the results.

Material and Methods

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a meta-analysis design. First introduced by Glass in 1976, meta-analysis is defined as a statistical technique used to integrate and synthesize findings from individual studies[21].

The research sample includes theses and articles from academic social work studies involving children and young people as participants. The inclusion criteria for the study have been established within the methodology, while studies falling outside these criteria have been designated as exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies must have been published between 2015 and 2020 to ensure relevance and timeliness.
- Studies must be indexed in the specified databases or search engines.
- Studies must employ a quantitative research design to allow for the calculation of effect size.
- The study sample must include children and young people as participants.
- Studies must be published in academic social work journals.

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- Studies must be published in Turkish and conducted within Türkiye.
- Full-text access to the theses must be available.

Coding

During the coding phase, a critical stage of the meta-analysis method, three primary coding methods were employed. First, the "descriptive data of the study" coding was performed, which involved examining details such as publication years, source types, databases, publishing institutions, publication types, and authors. The second stage, "content of the study" coding, focused on ethical considerations, including informed consent forms, ethics committee approvals, multiple rights considerations, and ethical dilemmas. Finally, the "study data" coding was performed to analyze statistical information such as means, standard deviations, and effect sizes.

Data Collection

As part of the research, various sources and databases were utilized for data collection. These included the National Thesis Center of the Higher Education Council (YÖKTEZ), ULAKBİM, Google Scholar, YÖK Academy, and DergiPark. Additionally, key search terms such as “child”, “youth”, “young”, “vulnerable groups”, “social work”, “disadvantage”, “adolescence”, “adolescent”, and “social service” were used to retrieve relevant studies. When selecting these key terms, care was taken to ensure they reflect the distinct characteristics of the target population and the research field, while also aligning with the existing literature in social work. The search process was conducted between March 2, 2021, and March 12, 2021.

The first step of the search process involved searching for articles, yielding a total of 563 studies. Of these, 418 studies were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion included qualitative research design (210 studies), involvement of participants other than children and youth (64 studies), and the absence of statistical data needed to calculate effect size (144 studies). As a result, 145 article studies were included in the meta-analysis. When examining the participant groups of these studies, 39 studies involved child participants (concepts of children and adolescents), 101 studies involved young participants (concepts of youth), and 5 studies involved both child and young participants.

The second step of the search process involved identifying relevant theses, yielding a total of 174 studies. Of these, 127 studies were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion included 72 studies with a qualitative research design, 2 studies conducted in a different language, 20 studies involving participants other than children and youth, and 33 studies lacking the necessary statistical data. Consequently, 47 theses were included in the meta-analysis. In terms of participant groups, 31 studies focused on children, 14 studies examined young participants, and 2 studies included both children and young participants.

In conclusion, the meta-analysis was conducted with a total of 192 studies.

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Analyzing Data

At this stage, all data were first analyzed using two scales based on their form and content characteristics, following the coding method. In addition to these characteristics, the following aspects were also considered:

- Consideration of children's rights.
- Approval from an ethics committee.
- Inclusion of consent forms.
- The potential benefits of the study for the child.
- Assessment of any coercion involved.
- Identification of ethical dilemmas.
- Types of children included in the studies.
- Use of appropriate language.
- Alignment of research questions with developmental stages.
- Researcher's competence.

In addition to these coding methods, the studies were also analyzed based on their data. In this context, the “Group Difference Meta-analysis” model was employed for the meta-analysis. This model requires naturally occurring groups, such as male and female, to calculate the standardized effect size. Accordingly, the data were divided into two separate groups-male and female-with gender considered as the independent variable. The "Hedges's g" value was used to determine the effect size. To interpret the effect sizes, Cohen's (1998) standardized effect size classification was applied, where 0.2 represents a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 a large effect. Additionally, the "Random Effects Model" was employed as the effect model. This model was selected based on a review of the relevant literature, which indicated that many studies in the social sciences align with this approach. Another reason for selecting this model was the high level of heterogeneity among the included studies. Additionally, Microsoft Office Excel 2021 was used for analyzing the descriptive data, while the Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) software was employed to calculate the overall effect size.

Result

Descriptive Data of the Study

A total of 192 studies were analyzed within the scope of this research. Of these, 70 focused on children, 115 on youth, and 7 on other participants. The findings from these studies were subjected to formal analyses, which are presented below.

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Table 1. Trends in study distribution over time: increase and decrease patterns by year

Years of Work	Frequencies	Percent (%)
2015	11	5.73
2016	20	10.42
2017	12	6.25
2018	39	20.31
2019	62	32.29
2020	48	25.00

An analysis of the distribution of studies by year reveals a notable upward trend in publications starting from 2018, with the highest number of studies recorded in 2019, marking it as the most significant contributing year to the research. A slight decline in publications is observed in 2020, potentially due to the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

Table 2. Distribution of studies by publication type: articles, master's theses, and doctoral theses

Publication Type	Frequencies	Percent (%)
Master Thesis	44	22.92
PhD Thesis	3	1.56
National and International Articles	145	75.52

An analysis of the studies included in the meta-analysis by publication type reveals that the majority of the studies, 145 (75.52%), were published as national and international articles. This was followed by 44 master's theses (22.92%) and 3 doctoral theses (1.56%) (Table 2). This distribution highlights the prominence of article-based studies in the literature, with a comparatively smaller representation of theses.

Data on the Contents of Studies

Within the scope of this research, the included studies were first examined to determine whether they addressed children's rights. Specifically, the analysis considered the four guiding principles of the United Nations General Assembly's Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted on November 20, 1989: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival, and development, and the right to participation. The findings revealed that, out of the 192 studies included in the research, only 14 explicitly addressed children's rights.

In addition to children's rights, the presence of informed consent forms from participants and their guardians was also examined. The findings indicated that, among the 192 studies included in the research, 45 studies incorporated informed consent forms (19 written, 20 verbal, and 6 both written and verbal). For the remaining studies, it was unclear whether informed consent was obtained, particularly in many article-based studies where researchers did not specify this aspect. Regarding parental consent, since most participants were under the age of 18 and classified as “child participants”,

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obtaining parental consent was deemed necessary. Accordingly, out of the 192 studies, only 14 reported obtaining parental consent, with 13 using written consent and 1 using verbal consent.

In addition to the previously mentioned data regarding the content of the included studies, it was found that 62 out of the 192 studies had obtained ethical approval. These studies ensured that participants were not exposed to any risks, emphasized voluntariness, and did not encounter ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, while some studies employed scales appropriate for the developmental stages of participants, 16 studies were deemed inappropriate in this regard. Confidentiality was prioritized, and researchers conducted studies within their areas of competence. Additionally, 78 studies had obtained the necessary legal permissions, and no bias or conflict of interest was identified.

Findings on the Overall Impact

Within the scope of this research, a comparison group was required to calculate the effect sizes of the studies. Accordingly, gender was selected as the independent variable, while ethical principles and standards were designated as the dependent variables. The magnitude of the difference between male and female participants was then analyzed based on the effect size. At this stage, all studies were categorized into those involving child, young, and other participants.

Based on the effect size and heterogeneity test results presented in Table 3, an analysis of 70 studies involving child participants revealed an effect size of Hedges's g = 0.257 in the random effects model, indicating a small effect size. Additionally, the I^2 value was calculated as 96.382, suggesting a high level of heterogeneity among the studies. These findings suggest that the difference between gender (independent variable) and ethical principles and standards (dependent variable) among child participants is minimal. In other words, no significant difference was observed between genders in terms of ethical principles and standards, highlighting the importance of adhering to ethical principles consistently, regardless of gender differences. The high heterogeneity observed in the studies points to potential methodological variations across the studies. Despite this variability, the small effect size emphasizes the need for uniform adherence to ethical standards across all studies, independent of gender.

Table 3. Effect sizes and heterogeneity test results for studies involving child participants

Model	Number of Studies	Effect Size	Standard Error	Z-value	p	%95 Confidence Interval		Heterogeneity Test			
						Lower Limit	Upper Limit	Freedom d (Q)	Q-value	p	I^2
Fixed Effect Model	70	0.088	0.012	7.079	0.000	0.064	0.112	69	1906.93	0.000	96.382
Random Effect Model	70	0.257	0.067	3.835	0.000	0.126	0.228				

According to the Forest Plot graph illustrating the distribution of studies based on the random effects model, the effect sizes of the studies appear to be relatively similar.

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However, some studies exhibit higher effect sizes, while others demonstrate lower effect sizes, indicating variability in impact levels[22-26].

An analysis of the 115 studies involving young participants revealed an average effect size of Hedges's g = 0.189 in the random effects model, indicating a small effect size. Additionally, the I^2 value was calculated as 96.861, indicating a high level of heterogeneity among the studies (Table 4). Based on Cohen's (1988) standardized mean difference classification, the effect size was categorized as small. These findings suggest that similar to studies involving children, the difference between gender (independent variable) and ethical principles and standards (dependent variable) among young participants is minimal. This underscores the importance of consistently adhering to ethical principles and standards, regardless of gender.

Table 4. Effect sizes and heterogeneity test results for studies involving young participants

Model	Number of Studies	Effect Size	Standard Error	Z-value	p	%95 Confidence Interval		Heterogeneity Test			
						Lower Limit	Upper Limit	Freedom d (Q)	Q-value	p	I^2
Fixed Effect Model	115	0.152	0.010	15.855	0.000	0.113	0.170	114	3631.397	0.000	96.861
Random Effect Model	115	0.189	0.055	3.463	0.000	0.082	0.296				

According to the Forest Plot Graph, which reveals the distribution of the studies included in the study according to the random effect model, all studies have a close level of impact. However, there are also studies with more effect[14,27,28] or less effect than others[29].

An analysis of the seven studies involving participants categorized as "other" revealed an average effect size of Hedges's g = 0.214 in the random effects model, suggesting a small effect size. Additionally, the I^2 value was calculated as 88.188, indicating a considerable level of heterogeneity among the studies (Table 5). Based on Cohen's (1988) standardized effect size classification, the observed effect size is small. These findings suggest that the difference between gender (independent variable) and ethical principles and standards (dependent variable) in studies involving "other" participants is minimal. This indicates that ethical principles and standards do not significantly vary based on gender within this participant group, underscoring the importance of maintaining universal ethical guidelines across all research.

Table 5. Effect sizes and heterogeneity test results for studies involving other participants

Model	Number of Studies	Effect Size	Standard Error	Z-value	p	%95 Confidence Interval		Heterogeneity Test			
						Lower Limit	Upper Limit	Freedom d (Q)	Q-value	p	I^2
Fixed Effect Model	7	0.256	0.040	6.419	0.000	0.178	0,335	6	5.,492	0.000	88.188
Random Effect Model	7	0.214	0.126	1.695	0.000	-0.034	0.462				

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According to the Forest Plot Graph, which reveals the distribution of the studies included in the study according to the random effect model, all studies have an effect close to each other. However, there are also studies with the highest[30] and the lowest effect[31].

In conclusion, the magnitude of the difference between male and female participants regarding ethical principles and standards, as the dependent variable, was assessed based on effect sizes across the analyzed studies. This evaluation, conducted across both thesis and article studies, revealed that in research involving child and youth participants, the difference in ethical principles and standards between genders was consistently minimal across all analyses.

Discussion

This study aimed to assess the adherence to ethical principles and standards in academic publications on child and youth-focused social work. A meta-analysis was conducted on a total of 192 studies, representing 26.05% of all collected studies. The number of studies included in the meta-analysis varied depending on the research focus and objectives. Notably, no prior meta-analytical studies on this topic have been identified in the national social work literature. The majority of the analyzed studies originated from the field of psychology, with a smaller proportion from sociology within the broader domain of social sciences. In contrast, the international literature includes several meta-analyses on similar topics; however, the number of studies incorporated in these analyses varies significantly. For instance, while some meta-analyses include as many as 88 studies, others incorporate as few as 15[32-37].

The meta-analyzed studies were examined for their distribution across years, revealing an uneven pattern with fluctuations over time. The lowest number of studies was recorded in 2015, whereas the highest number was observed in 2019. However, despite this peak, a decline in the number of studies was noted from 2019 to 2020, largely attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic significantly constrained research activities by limiting access to research environments, particularly affecting studies involving children and youth. The transition of schools (elementary, middle, high schools, and universities) to online education hindered access to sample groups, which are essential for such research. Additionally, delays in obtaining necessary legal permissions further impeded the feasibility of conducting these studies. Beyond its impact on physical and legal conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic also had profound effects on the motivation levels of researchers. During this period, academics experienced heightened feelings of alienation from their profession across various dimensions. Consequently, many reported a significant sense of vulnerability and isolation in multiple aspects of their professional lives[38].

Another key finding of this research concerns the publication types of the studies. The analysis revealed that most studies included in the meta-analysis were published as articles. However, in contrast to this finding, some meta-analyses conducted by other researchers have reported a higher prevalence of doctoral studies, while others have found master's theses to be more common[39-41]. However, some studies aligned with the findings obtained in this research[42-44].

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Within the scope of this research, a total of 192 studies were analyzed based on effect sizes. Specifically, 70 studies involving child participants, 115 studies involving young participants, and 7 studies involving other participants were examined separately using the Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) software. Prior to the analysis phase, the "Group Differences Meta-Analysis" model was employed to define natural groups, such as male and female, to facilitate the calculation of standardized effect sizes. For effect size estimation, "Hedges' g" was utilized, and the "Random Effects Model" was chosen to account for variability across studies. Accordingly, the effect sizes calculated for the studies were as follows: Hedges' g=0.257 for the 70 studies involving child participants, Hedges' g=0.189 for the 115 studies involving young participants, and Hedges' g=0.214 for the 7 studies involving other participants. According to Cohen's (1988) standardized mean difference criteria, these values indicate a small effect size. The findings suggest that in studies involving children, young people, and other participants, the differences in ethical principles and standards between male and female participants are minimal. These findings suggest that in studies involving children and young people, there is no significant difference between genders regarding ethical principles and standards, underscoring the need for uniform ethical considerations. A review of the relevant literature indicates that no previous studies have specifically examined this aspect within the field of social work, making direct comparisons challenging. However, individual studies in both social work research and research involving children and young people highlight the significance of adhering to ethical principles and standards. In studies focusing on social work research, certain scholars are particularly emphasized, with their work underscoring the importance of conducting both quantitative and qualitative research through evidence-based practices to ensure ethical integrity and effective problem-solving in social work interventions[6,7,45-51]. The second point is that several studies, along with notable researchers, emphasize the ethical principles and standards that should be upheld in research involving children and young people[18,19,47]. Across these studies, it is notable that the focus is exclusively on children, without distinguishing young participants, in contrast to the present research. According to legal definitions, all individuals under the age of 18 are classified as children. Furthermore, within the scope of this research, no studies have been identified that assert significant differences in ethical principles and standards between genders in research involving children and young people. This finding aligns with the results obtained in the present study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study conducted a meta-analysis of ethical evaluations in academic publications on social work with a focus on children and youth. Quantitative studies related to the topic were systematically reviewed, and the findings were presented. A total of 192 studies were analyzed, the majority of which were journal articles. Among these, 70 studies involved children, 115 involved young people, and 7 involved other participants. The highest number of publications was recorded in 2019, with university students being the most frequently studied sample group. Due to the heterogeneity in data distribution, the random effects model was employed. Across all groups, a small effect size was observed. Furthermore, it was noted that researchers generally prioritized

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scientific research ethics over ethical principles and standards specifically tailored to children and young people.

Recommendations:

- Future research in social work, especially involving children and young people, should place greater emphasis on the application of specific ethical principles tailored to these populations. Researchers are encouraged to explore ethical standards that account for the unique vulnerabilities of children and young people, beyond general scientific research ethics.
- A universally accepted set of ethical guidelines for research involving children and youth should be established. This would ensure consistency in ethical decision-making and promote the protection of rights for these vulnerable populations across various social work settings and research methodologies.
- Although this study found minimal differences in ethical principles between male and female participants, further research is needed to explore gender-specific ethical considerations. Future studies should investigate whether ethical standards should be adjusted based on gender differences or other demographic factors to ensure that all participants are treated fairly and equitably.
- Social work researchers should receive more comprehensive training on ethical principles, particularly those that apply to vulnerable populations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, only studies published in Turkish and conducted within Türkiye were included, which limits the findings to the national literature. Additionally, only quantitative research was considered, excluding qualitative studies that could have provided deeper insights into ethical principles. High heterogeneity was observed among the studies, which may impact the reliability of the analysis due to methodological differences. External factors, such as the pandemic, hindered the data collection process and the feasibility of conducting research, leading to a decrease in the number of publications in 2020. Finally, the analysis was based solely on numerical data from the studies, which resulted in a lack of content depth. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a broader sample and methodological diversity.

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