

Recreational Reward-Based Motivation: a Strategy for Strengthening Motivation among High-Achieving Students at Child Pesantren

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Abstract

The practice of rewarding students in Islamic boarding schools often remains merely symbolic and has yet to foster meaningful experiences. This gap opens up opportunities to explore how recreational activities can serve as a more dynamic and sustainable motivator for students. This study aims to analyze the role of recreational rewards in shaping the motivation of high-achieving students at PPATQ Raudlatul Falah Pati. The approach used is a qualitative case study involving observations of more than 500 students, interviews with one kiai, four ustaz, five students, and five parents, and an analysis of academic documents and tahfidz achievements. The results indicate that recreation-based rewards function as multidimensional motivators. Academically, students ranked 1–5 demonstrated improved learning strategies and consistent achievement. Regarding Quran memorization, twice-yearly exams fostered a more structured review routine. In the social sphere, participation in boarding school activities, such as haflah, expanded the meaning of achievement beyond the classroom. Meanwhile, indicators of punctuality through early arrival formed a new habitus supported by families. Recreation became an anticipated emotional experience and a symbol of collective recognition of students' efforts. Its implications point toward a transformation of the reward approach in Islamic boarding schools from mere incentives into a pedagogical strategy that shapes character and sustains achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

In the global landscape of contemporary education, the issue of learning motivation has shifted from a control-based approach to one centered on experience and emotional engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wei, 2021). This transformation is inextricably linked to the growing awareness that educational success is determined not only by cognitive achievements but also by students' psychological well-being and the meaning they ascribe to their learning. International studies indicate that learning approaches integrating affective experiences can significantly enhance learning engagement (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Ilma Nafia & Suyatno, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this context, the practice of providing experience-based rewards, such as recreational activities, is beginning to gain attention as an alternative pedagogical strategy with a more humanistic approach.

In the field of Islamic education, particularly in Islamic boarding schools, learning motivation has traditionally been rooted in spiritual values, such as sincerity, patience, and an otherworldly orientation (Al-Attas, 2023; Ma'arif et al., 2022; Nurjanah et al., 2018). Previous studies in Islamic education have tended to place intrinsic motivation at the center of santri character formation, with an emphasis on the internalization of religious values. However, recent developments indicate that integrating intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is becoming increasingly relevant, particularly in addressing the dynamics of a generation of students living in the digital age and in a culture of instant gratification. Scholars generally focus on strengthening the curriculum, teaching methods, and the role of teachers, but have not yet extensively explored experience-based rewards as a motivational strategy.

Several studies have examined various forms of motivation in education. A study by Guryan et al., (2016), Gneezy et al., (2011), Schwab & Somerville (2022) highlight the role of incentives in influencing learning behavior, while research by Deci et al., (1999), Black & Allen (2018) and Kim & Ahn (2017) critique the negative impact of external rewards on intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, recent research in experiential learning indicates that direct experience has a more profound impact on shaping engagement and the meaning of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). In the context of Islamic education, several studies have examined pesantren-based character development practices, but these have focused more on curriculum and tradition rather than reward design (Azra, 2018). Existing studies predominantly examine motivational constructs from cognitive and spiritual perspectives, while paying limited attention to experience-based reward systems within pesantren contexts.

However, empirical studies that systematically examine recreational rewards as a structured motivational strategy in Islamic boarding schools remain limited. Little is known about how experience-based rewards, such as recreational activities, can be pedagogically integrated into the pesantren education system,

which is rich in spiritual values. Previous research has not sufficiently addressed how experience-based rewards can simultaneously connect cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in the context of santri. Furthermore, there has been no study that empirically tests a recreation-based motivation model using measurable performance indicators, such as academic achievement, Quran memorization, social participation, and time management, within a single integrated framework.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of how recreational rewards function as a strategy to strengthen the motivation of high-achieving students at PPATQ Raudlatul Falah Pati. Specifically, this study addresses the following question: how does a recreational reward system influence students' academic, memorization, social, and disciplinary motivation? This study employs a qualitative case study design, involving observations of more than 500 students, interviews with religious leaders, teachers, students, and parents, and an analysis of achievement records.

This study contributes to four main aspects. Theoretically, it offers the Recreational Reward-Based Motivation model as a new conceptual framework for pesantren education. Empirically, it presents rich field data from the context of Indonesian pesantren, a subject that remains under-explored in the global literature. Methodologically, this study integrates observation, interviews, and document analysis into a comprehensive design. Socially, this study provides practical implications for pesantren administrators in designing more adaptive, humanistic, and sustainable motivation strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of student motivation within the natural context of an Islamic boarding school (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2022; de Vries, 2020). This design was chosen because it aligns with the study's objective of understanding the meanings, experiences, and social constructions that arise from the practice of recreation-based rewards. Case studies allow for the holistic exploration of phenomena within the constraints of a specific system (Yin, 2014). This approach is also relevant in Islamic education research, which demands sensitivity to values, traditions, and daily practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study was conducted at PPATQ Raudlatul Falah Pati, a tahfidz boarding school that integrates formal madrasah education with an intensive Quran memorization program. This institution was selected because it has a structured, sustainable recreation-based rewards system. The students come from diverse social backgrounds and have a busy daily schedule that balances academic studies and Quran memorization. This context provides a rich setting for examining how experience-based rewards function within an environment steeped in spiritual values.

The primary data source consisted of more than 500 students who were

directly observed in their daily activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with one religious' leader, the primary decision-maker; four teachers, program implementers; five students, reward recipients; and five parents, to represent an external perspective. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with participants selected based on their direct involvement in the reward program. In addition, this study used documentary data, including 1–5 grade rankings on midterm and final exams, Quran memorization achievement records, and student disciplinary records for early arrival at the boarding school. Data were collected using three main techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted during academic sessions and tahfidz to capture patterns of student behavior. Interviews utilized open-ended prompts that allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Document analysis was used to verify consistency between narrative and administrative data. The data collection process took place in stages to ensure the depth and accuracy of the information.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, comprising coding, categorization, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the initial stage, the data were transcribed and open-coded to identify initial patterns. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into themes representing the dimensions of santri motivation. Interpretation was conducted by linking empirical findings to the theoretical frameworks of motivation and experiential learning. The analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure depth of meaning and consistency of interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Recreation as a Driver of Academic and Memorization Motivation

The first finding indicates that recreation-based rewards serve as a concrete and focused motivator for academic and memorization achievements. Students not only understand the goals but also feel a sense of urgency to achieve them due to the anticipation of recreational experiences. This motivation evolves into more structured learning strategies, as evidenced by changes in study patterns, the rhythm of review sessions, and the consistency of achievements.

Table 1. Findings on Academic and Memorization Motivation

Data Source	Citation / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Kiai	"Students now have a clearer sense of purpose, not just studying for its own sake."	High	Rewards provide clear direction and meaning in the learning process
Teacher 1	"Students' grades are improving as they have started studying collaboratively."	High	Increased collaboration enhances academic performance

Teacher 2	"Memorization review sessions have become more regular."	Moderate	Improved consistency in memorization practices
Student 1	"I want to go on a field trip, so I study more seriously."	High	External motivation stimulates stronger internal motivation
Student 2	"I manage my memorization schedule more effectively now."	Moderate	Improved time management in memorization activities
Parent 1	"My child has become more diligent in studying."	High	Positive impact extends to the home environment
Observation	Increased intensity in study behavior	High	Observable behavioral changes in learning engagement
Document	Academic scores show consistent improvement	High	Institutional records validate performance enhancement

Source: Thematic analysis of primary data conducted by the researcher

Referring to Table 1. First, the kiai’s perspective emphasizes that recreation shifts the orientation of learning from a mere routine to a conscious goal. The statement “having a clear goal” indicates a shift from latent motivation toward directed motivation. In the observations, this shift is evident among the students, who have begun setting weekly targets, particularly for completing Quranic chapters and reinforcing academic material before exams. Second, Teacher 1 observed an improvement in performance following a shift in collective strategy. Collaborative learning has become a more common practice. Small-group discussions following the halaqah and before break time have created opportunities to share insights. This phenomenon demonstrates that rewards do not work on an individual basis; rather, they stimulate a collaborative learning environment.

Third, Teacher 2 highlighted the consistency of review sessions. The intensity of memorization practice increased and became more structured. The students began breaking down their goals into realistic daily units. In field notes, some student groups established internal agreements on previously unstructured review schedules. This indicates the internalization of cognitive discipline stemming from external motivation. Fourth, at the student level, experience is central to change. Student 1 expressed an initial external motivation—the desire to participate in recreational activities—which evolved into a serious commitment to learning. Student 2 added a dimension of self-regulation by managing memorization time. These two narratives demonstrate a smooth transition from extrinsic to a more stable intrinsic motivation.

Fifth, from the family's perspective and based on objective evidence, parents observed an increase in their children’s perseverance at home. These observations reinforce this finding through an increase in the duration of independent study. Grade reports show an upward trend and stability in grades 1–5. The consistency between narrative data, observations, and documentation

confirms that recreational rewards not only impact outcomes but also continuously reshape the learning process.

Recreation as a Reinforcement of Social Identity and Pesantren Participation

The second finding shows that recreation-based rewards do not stop at individual achievements but also reinforce students' social identity within the pesantren ecosystem. Recreation serves as a symbol of collective recognition, spurring active engagement in cultural activities such as *haflah*, *tilawah*, *rebana*, and other public roles. Achievements are no longer interpreted solely as numbers but as tangible contributions to life in the pesantren. Findings on social motivation and participation as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings on Social Motivation and Participation

Data Source	Citation / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Kiai	"All roles are valued, not only academic achievement."	High	Recognition of multidimensional forms of achievement
Ustaz 3	"Students are highly motivated to perform."	High	Increased self-confidence and performance motivation
Ustaz 4	"The <i>hafla</i> event has become more vibrant and engaging."	High	Increased student participation in social activities
Student 3	"I feel proud to be able to perform."	High	Development of positive social identity
Student 4	"Friends support one another."	Moderate	Strengthening of peer solidarity
Parent 2	"Children have become more confident."	High	Positive psychological impact on students
Observation	Significant increase in participation	High	Direct field evidence of behavioral change
Document	The number of event committee members has increased	Moderate	Administrative evidence of broader involvement

Source: Thematic analysis of primary data conducted by the researcher

Drawing on the presentation of Table 2, it is evident that social motivation and participation have increased significantly and in a multidimensional manner. The data indicate that key actors, such as the *kiai* and *ustaz*, emphasize the importance of non-academic roles, thereby broadening the meaning of student achievement beyond cognitive aspects to include performative and social dimensions. Students' expressions of pride and mutual peer support reflect the formation of social identity and collective solidarity. In addition, parents' perceptions of increased self-confidence highlight a positive psychological impact. Observational findings and administrative documents further validate the rise in participation at an empirical level. Overall, the table suggests that activities such as the *hafla* function not merely as performance events, but also as effective

platforms for fostering character development, enhancing self-confidence, and strengthening social cohesion within the educational environment.

Recreation as a Reinforcer of Discipline and Time Culture

The third finding confirms that recreation-based rewards function as a subtle yet effective mechanism for fostering discipline. The indicator of being the first to arrive is not merely an administrative measure but has evolved into a cultural practice that shapes a new habitus in students' daily lives. Recreation serves as an incentive that consistently drives behavioral change, both within and outside the boarding school.

Table 3. Findings on Discipline and Time Culture

Data Source	Citation / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Kiai	"Discipline is cultivated, not imposed."	High	Internalization of disciplinary values
Teacher 1	"Students are arriving earlier than usual."	High	Positive behavioral change in punctuality
Student 5	"I want to be the first."	High	Emergence of healthy competition
Parent 3	"We now drop them off earlier."	Moderate	Increased family involvement in supporting discipline
Parent 4	"The child is more prepared."	Moderate	Adaptation to structured routines
Observation	Arrival patterns are more orderly	High	Direct validation of improved discipline
Document	Records show an increase in early arrival sequences	High	Objective administrative evidence

Source: Thematic analysis of primary data conducted by the researcher

Drawing on the presentation of Table 3, it is evident that the development of discipline and time culture emerges as a significant and internally driven process. The kiai's statement underscores that discipline is cultivated rather than imposed, indicating a shift toward the internalization of values among students. This is further supported by teachers' observations of improved punctuality, reflecting a positive behavioral change. Students' motivation to arrive earlier demonstrates the emergence of healthy competition, which reinforces disciplined habits. Additionally, parents' involvement in adjusting drop-off times and preparing their children suggests a supportive home environment that aligns with institutional expectations. Observational data confirming more orderly arrival patterns, along with administrative records showing increased early arrivals, provide strong empirical validation. Overall, the table highlights that discipline is not merely a formal rule but a shared cultural practice shaped collaboratively by students, educators, and families.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that recreation-based rewards function not as superficial stimuli, but as a framework of experiences that shapes motivation in a layered and sustained manner. Students' motivation no longer stands as a single driving force but rather results from the interaction among goal orientation, emotional experiences, and social recognition. This pattern indicates that motivation in an educational context cannot be reduced to an intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy but must be understood as a dynamic, context-dependent spectrum (Locke & Schattke, 2019; Luchian & Boiangiu, 2020; Prošić Santovac & Halas Popović, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Theoretically, these findings expand the framework of Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that optimal motivation arises when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met simultaneously (Hagger et al., 2020; Mouratidis et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2022). In this study, academic achievement and Quran memorization represent the competence dimension; recreation provides an affective space that strengthens psychological autonomy, while social participation in pesantren activities strengthens relatedness. Interestingly, rewards do not halt the process at the extrinsic level but rather serve as a bridge toward the internalization of values, as emphasized in the latest developments of this theory, which hold that external motivation can transform into autonomous motivation when supported by the appropriate social context (Basikin, 2020; Deci, 2016; Luria, 2022).

Furthermore, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of experiential learning, which places experience at the core of meaningful learning. In contemporary literature, experience serves not only as a medium for reflection but also as a mechanism for fostering emotional engagement with the learning process (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022; Kolb & Kolb, 2012). However, this study highlights a significant extension: recreational experiences not only facilitate learning but also establish a recurring cycle of motivation. In other words, experience serves as the energy that sustains motivation, rather than merely a stage in the learning cycle.

Compared with previous studies, there is an intriguing conceptual tension. Classical literature often suggests that external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation through the overjustification effect (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2020, 2022). This critique is further echoed in recent studies that highlight the risk of covert control within reward systems. However, the findings of this study actually reveal the opposite: experience-based rewards are not controlling, but rather liberating. This aligns with recent findings that reward designs supporting autonomy actually strengthen engagement and the sustainability of motivation (Núñez & León, 2016; Patall & Zambrano, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

In the context of Islamic education, these findings make a significant contribution. Previous studies of pesantren have tended to emphasize the normative and spiritual dimensions as the primary sources of motivation.

However, this study shows that integrating spiritual values with modern motivational approaches is not contradictory but complementary. In this context, recreation serves as an affective medium that accelerates the internalization of values, rather than as a distraction from religious goals.

The primary novelty of this study lies in the construction of the Recreational Reward-Based Motivation model, which offers a synthesis of classical motivation theory and pesantren educational practices. This model demonstrates that motivation is formed through three main phases: expectation (anticipation of a reward), experience (emotional experience during the reward), and internalization (formation of values and habits). This cycle is repetitive and self-reinforcing, leading in stable, sustainable motivation. The model-building process was conducted inductively through three analytical stages. The first stage involved identifying units of meaning from each data source related to changes in the behavior of Islamic boarding school students. The second stage involved thematic categorization, grouping the findings into the following dimensions: academic-memorization, social-participation, and time management. The third stage is cross-thematic integration, which identifies the structural relationships that give rise to motivational patterns. This process yields a new conceptual framework that integrates experience, recognition, and self-regulation into a single system.

The resulting model (see Table 4) demonstrates that the cognitive dimension functions as a foundation for establishing measurable outcomes, particularly in terms of academic performance and memorization achievements. The affective dimension is reflected in enjoyable and engaging experiences that cultivate emotional attachment, satisfaction, and positive expectations among participants. In parallel, the social dimension provides a platform for collective validation, thereby reinforcing a shared sense of identity and strengthening social cohesion within the community. Importantly, these three dimensions are not independent; rather, they operate in an interconnected and dynamic cycle, where each dimension continuously influences and reinforces the others.

Table 4. Theoretical Model of Recreational Reward-Based Motivation

Dimension	Empirical Indicators	Process Mechanism	Motivational Outcomes
Cognitive	Academic performance; memorization achievement	Goal setting; strategic learning behaviors	Improved academic performance
Affective	Engagement in recreational experiences	Anticipation; emotional satisfaction	Sustained motivation over time
Social	Participation; collective discipline	Social recognition; peer interaction	Strengthened cohesion and social identity

Recreational Reward-Based Motivation Model

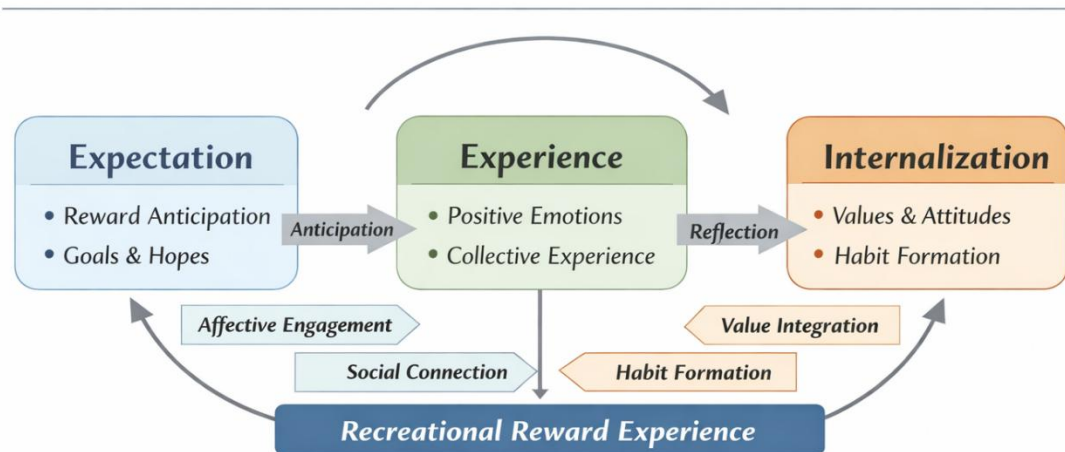


Figure 1. Recreational Reward-Based Motivation Model

Based on Table 4 and Figure 1, the proposed model depicts a cyclical motivational process that progresses from expectation to experience and ultimately to internalization. At the initial stage, students are motivated by expectations, particularly the desire to engage in recreational activities. As they participate, these expectations are translated into lived experiences, where students encounter emotional satisfaction, especially when rewards are obtained. Over time, these repeated experiences contribute to the internalization of key values such as discipline, perseverance, and social responsibility. This process is not linear but iterative, continuously reinforcing itself and gradually shaping a stable and enduring habitus among students.

A key contribution of this model lies in its integration of experience-based rewards within the educational framework of pesantren, which have traditionally emphasized normative and spiritual dimensions. Rather than replacing these values, the model complements them by introducing recreational experiences as a mediating bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In doing so, it demonstrates that enjoyment and engagement can coexist with, and even strengthen, religious and moral commitments. The Recreational Reward-Based Motivation model therefore offers a more adaptive and context-sensitive approach that aligns with the evolving characteristics and needs of contemporary pesantren students.

From a conceptual standpoint, this model advances classical theories of motivation by positioning experience as a central element in the motivational process. Empirically, the model is grounded in rigorous data triangulation, drawing from multiple sources to ensure the credibility and depth of findings. Practically, it provides a structured and applicable framework for Islamic boarding schools to design reward systems that are not only effective in motivating students but also meaningful and sustainable in the long term.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Self-

Determination Theory by introducing experience as a crucial mediating variable. While traditional perspectives emphasize the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, the findings of this study suggest that concrete, well-designed experiences can act as catalysts in activating those needs. In this sense, motivation is not merely understood as an internal psychological condition, but as an outcome shaped by intentional and structured experiential design. Furthermore, this study enriches the empirical landscape by offering insights from the context of Indonesian pesantren, a setting that remains relatively underexplored in global academic discourse. The findings indicate that religious environments do not constrain innovation; instead, they provide fertile ground for integrating pedagogical practices with deeply rooted values.

In practical terms, the study underscores the importance of developing reward systems that are grounded in both experience and values. Rewards should extend beyond material or symbolic forms to include emotionally engaging and meaningful experiences. Additionally, performance indicators should be broadened to incorporate not only academic achievement but also social engagement and disciplinary development. Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a case study approach restricts the generalizability of the findings, while the qualitative methodology depends significantly on the researcher's interpretation, even though data triangulation has been employed. Moreover, the model has not yet been quantitatively tested to determine the strength and significance of relationships among variables.

Future research is therefore encouraged to further validate and refine this model through quantitative approaches, such as structural equation modeling, in order to assess its construct validity more robustly. Comparative studies across different pesantren, or even across countries, would also be valuable in examining the broader applicability of the model within diverse cultural contexts. Ultimately, this study highlights that fostering motivation in educational settings requires more than instruction or normative reinforcement alone. Motivation must be intentionally designed as an experience. Within this framework, recreation—often perceived as secondary—emerges as a powerful entry point toward deeper, more meaningful, and sustainable motivational transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study points to an important insight: rewards grounded in recreational activities should not be seen as mere external incentives. Instead, they operate as part of an experiential structure that brings together cognitive, affective, and social elements within a continuous motivational cycle of expectation, experience, and internalization. At the expectation stage, academic targets and tahfidz achievements act as clear markers of competence. During the experience stage, recreational activities generate emotional satisfaction that encourages sustained involvement. Over time, in the internalization stage, values such as discipline,

persistence, and social responsibility become embedded in students' daily practices and shape their habitus. From this process emerges the Recreational Reward-Based Motivation model, which suggests that student motivation develops more consistently when learning environments combine meaningful experiences with shared recognition. In this context, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation becomes less central, as the quality and depth of experience play a more decisive role in connecting the two.

Based on these findings, educational institutions, particularly Islamic boarding schools, are encouraged to design reward systems that are rooted in experience, measurable in practice, and multidimensional in scope, while still reflecting core spiritual values. Indicators of performance should not be limited to academic outcomes alone but should also include Quran memorization, social engagement, and discipline, such as punctuality. This integrated approach supports the creation of a more balanced and holistic motivational environment. From a scholarly perspective, the study contributes to the broader discussion on motivation by positioning experience as a key mediating factor within a religious educational setting. It also offers empirical insights from Indonesian pesantren, a context that has received relatively limited attention in existing research. Nevertheless, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a case study design and qualitative methods limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized and does not allow for strong causal testing. Future studies are therefore recommended to examine the model using quantitative approaches, such as structural equation modeling, to validate its constructs more rigorously. Expanding the research across different institutions and cultural settings, as well as considering potential moderating factors such as age, gender, and program intensity, would further strengthen understanding of the model's applicability and robustness.

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