

Who Adolescents Use as Role Models and How They Influence Engagement in Mental Wellbeing Promotion



Taighde Éireann
Research Ireland



Health
Research
Institute

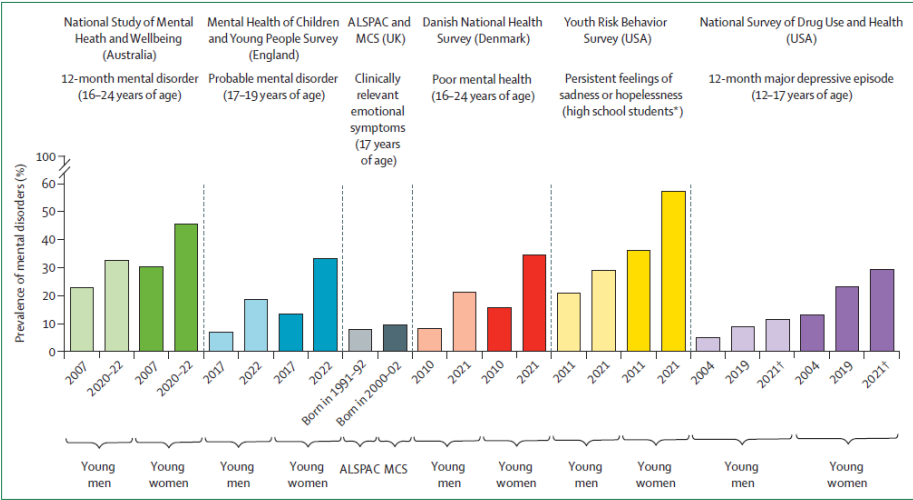
Health Promotion Conference, 23rd June 2026

Ms. Anna McHale,

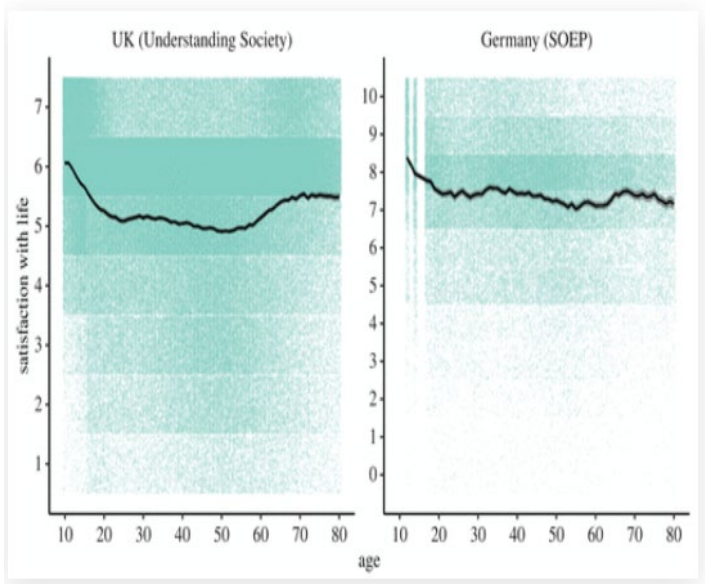
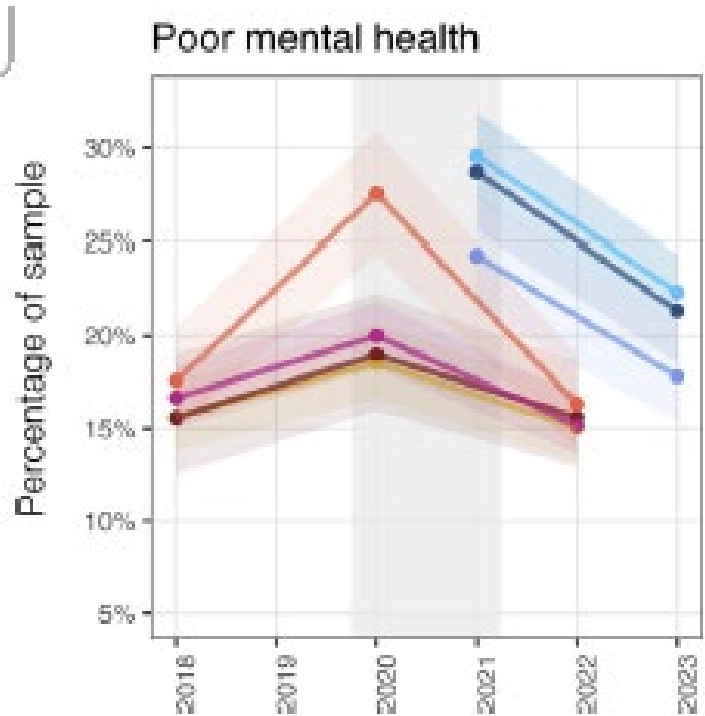
Primary Supervisory: Dr. Jennifer McMahon **Secondary Supervisor:** Prof. Mark Campbell

Funded by: Research Ireland in collaboration with Rugby Players Ireland

Mental Health & Wellbeing decline in Adolescence

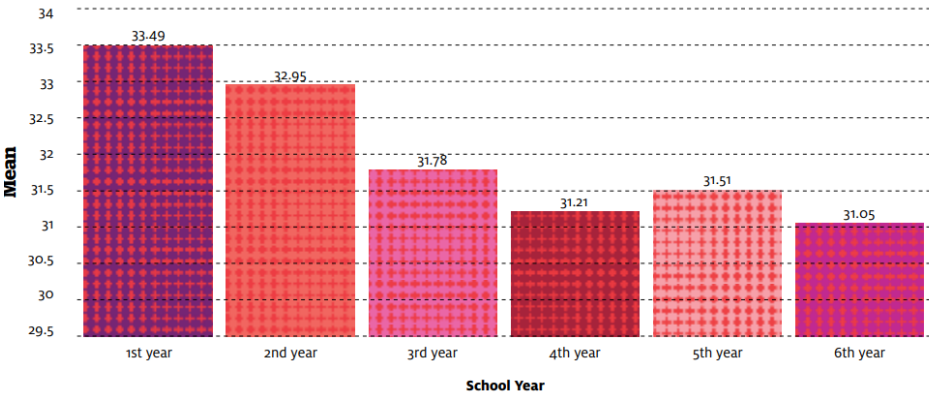


‘Decade long’ decline in youth mental health



Longitudinal decline in life satisfaction trajectories in UK and German data.

Figure 4.26: Satisfaction with life by school year



Longitudinal decline in life satisfaction trajectories in school context

Ireland has a Mental Health Engagement Problem



**Mental Health
Ireland**

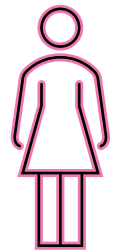
1 in 5



Do absolutely nothing per week for their mental health

Say they have no barriers to mental health support

Same number tell us they don't know how to support their mental health



Social/family activities



Exercise and therapy

Message:

People want to help themselves,
but they're struggling to find the
knowledge to do it properly

Embedding role models in the school environment



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice

2018–2023

Revised October 2019

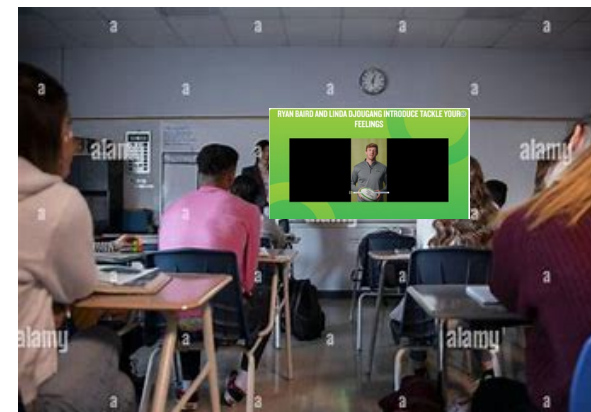


Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2019)

- emphasizes the holistic development of students through academic, physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual education.
- Places an emphasis on targeting culture and environment of wellbeing promotion in schools



**Teachers as
facilitators**
Should teachers be
discussing their own
experiences?



- ✓ Examples of stories
- ✓ Culture
- ✓ Safe environment

Role models encouraging mental wellbeing engagement



Identifying
a Role
Model



Who?
How?

Mental Wellbeing
Self-esteem
Self-efficacy
Positive coping strategies

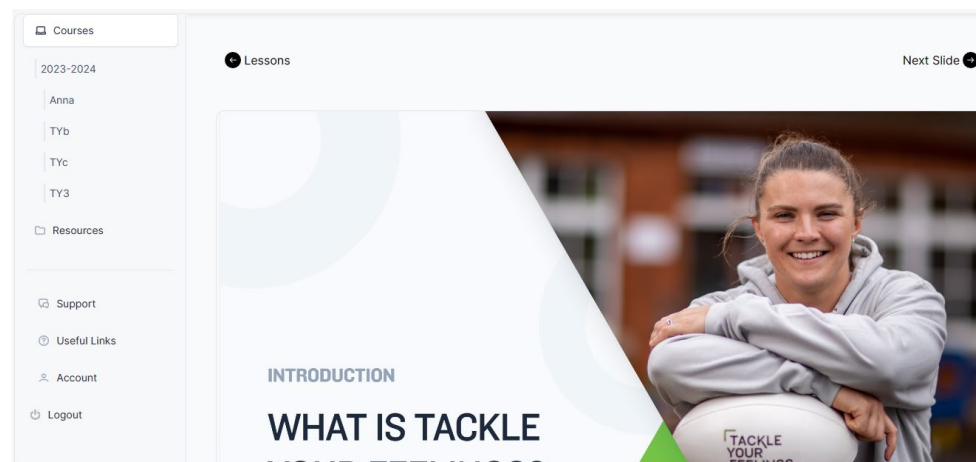
The Tackle Your Feelings Schools programme



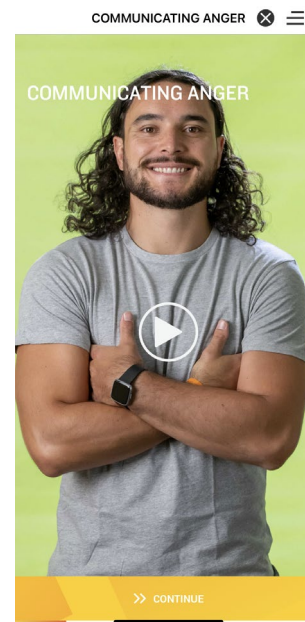
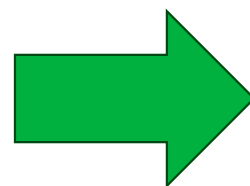
WHO?



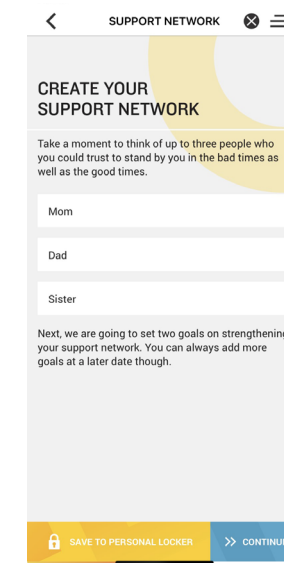
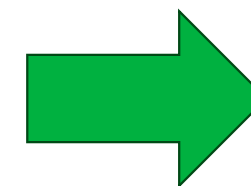
- 8-week school-based digital wellbeing programme
- ✓ Adolescents between 12-18 years
- ✓ Based on Irish SPHE curriculum
- ✓ Utilises digital technology
- ✓ Leverages prominent figures in Ireland



Psychoeducational material



Digital storytelling
from TYF
Ambassadors

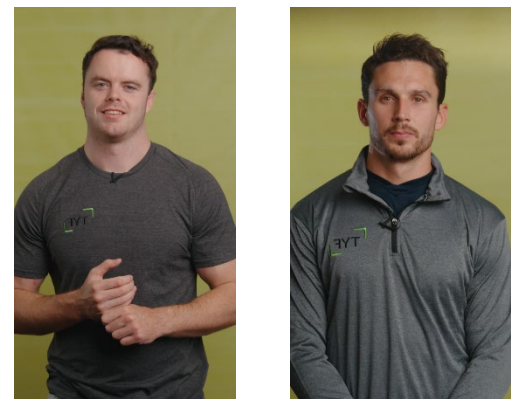


Activities (goal-setting,
identify strengths)

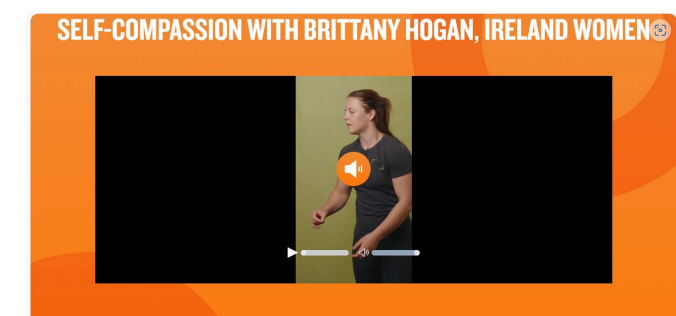
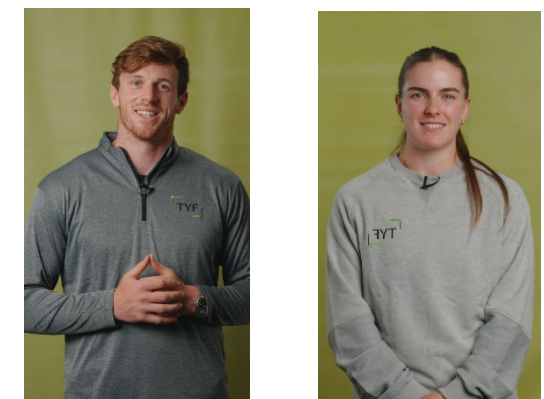
The Tackle Your Feelings Schools Programme



SCROLL



- ✓ **Gender** (11 males, 6 females)
- ✓ **Culture/Ethnicity** (Irish, South African, African, Northern Irish)
- ✓ **Notable players**
- ✓ **Young players**
- ✓ **LGBTBQ players**



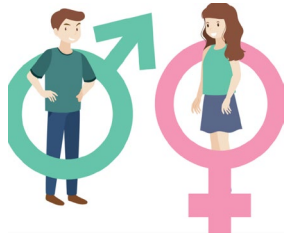
Selection process:

Who do adolescents select as role models?

What aspect of their perception of these role models predicts mental wellbeing?

Previous literature

Who do adolescents select as role models?



✓ Gender matched role models



✓ Ethnically matched role models



✓ Culturally matched role models



✓ Shared experience of overcoming a challenge

How does role model perception predict mental wellbeing?

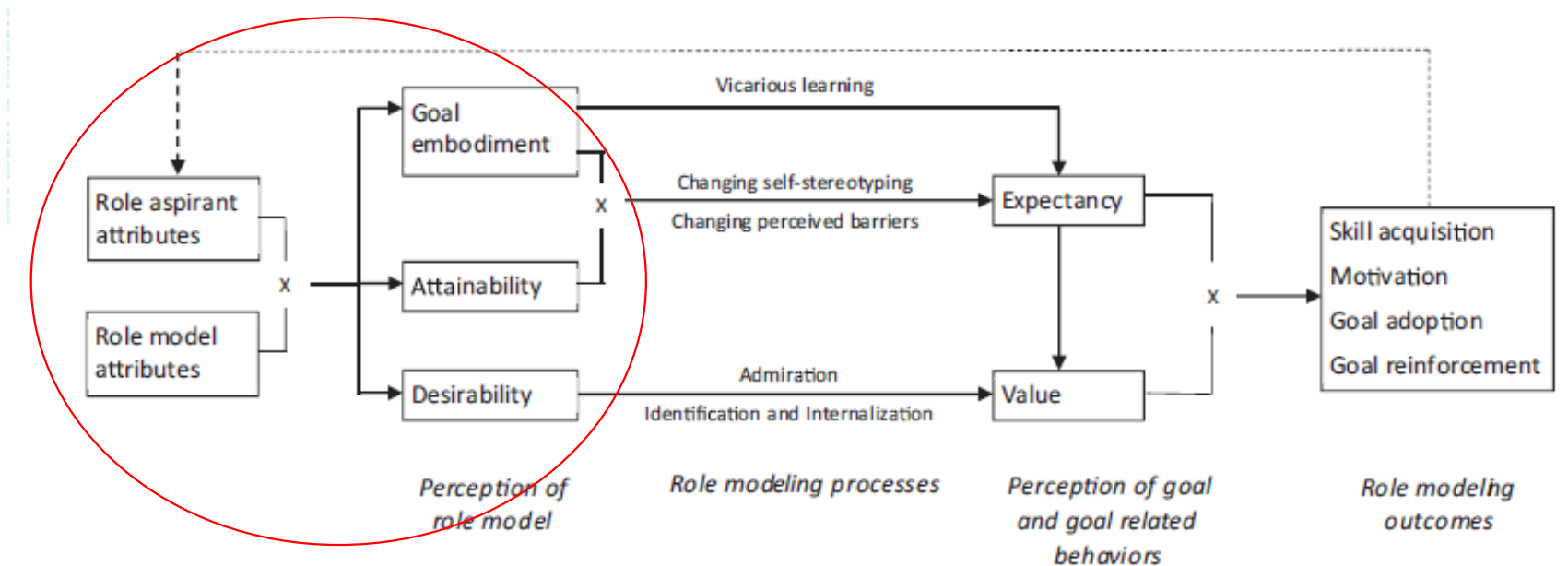
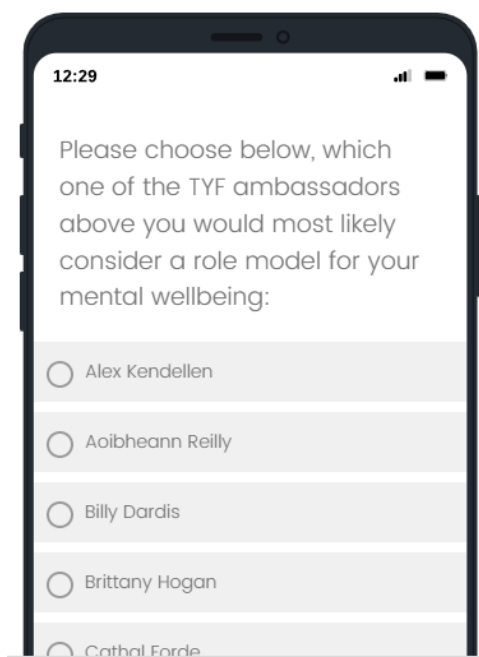


Figure 1. An illustration of the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling.

Perception of mediated role models

- ✓ Values (Share similar values)
- ✓ Credibility (credible sources)
- ✓ Impression (Emotional resonance)

Adaptation of the Role Model Perception Scale



Adapted Erlichman (2022) Role Model Perception Scale

Scale consists of (15 items)

Values (extent they embody values the observer admires or wishes to emulate)

Credibility (how believable, trustworthy and authentic they appear)

Impression (overall emotional resonance)



2 focus groups with adolescents
(N = 16)

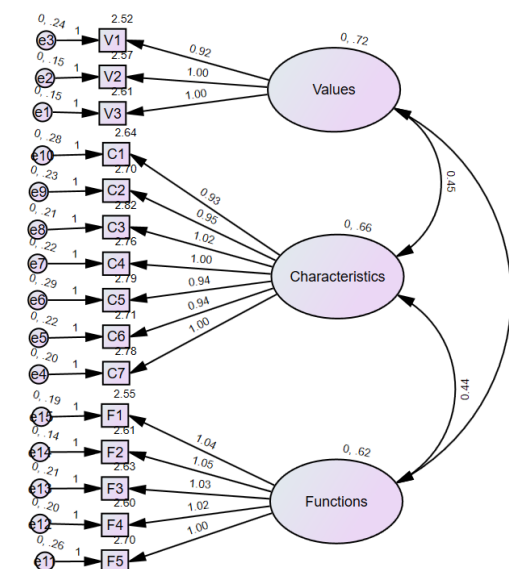


Experts rated items using Lawshe method
(N = 5)

Subscale 2: credibility of the role model	BT	VG	EK	MZ	NH
*Item 1: Accomplished	Essential	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Useful, but not essential	Remove
*Item 2: Expert	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Remove
*Item 3: Experienced	Essential	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 4: Knowledgeable	Essential	Essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 5: Qualified	Essential	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 6: Skilled	Essential	Essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 7: Successful	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Essential	Useful, but not essential	Remove
*Item 8: Capable	Essential	Essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 9: Sets an example	Essential	Essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 10: Sincere	Not essential	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
*Item 11: Honest	Useful, but not essential	Useful, but not essential	Essential	Essential	Remove
Additional comments:	None	The role	I could consider including	about about	Exclude



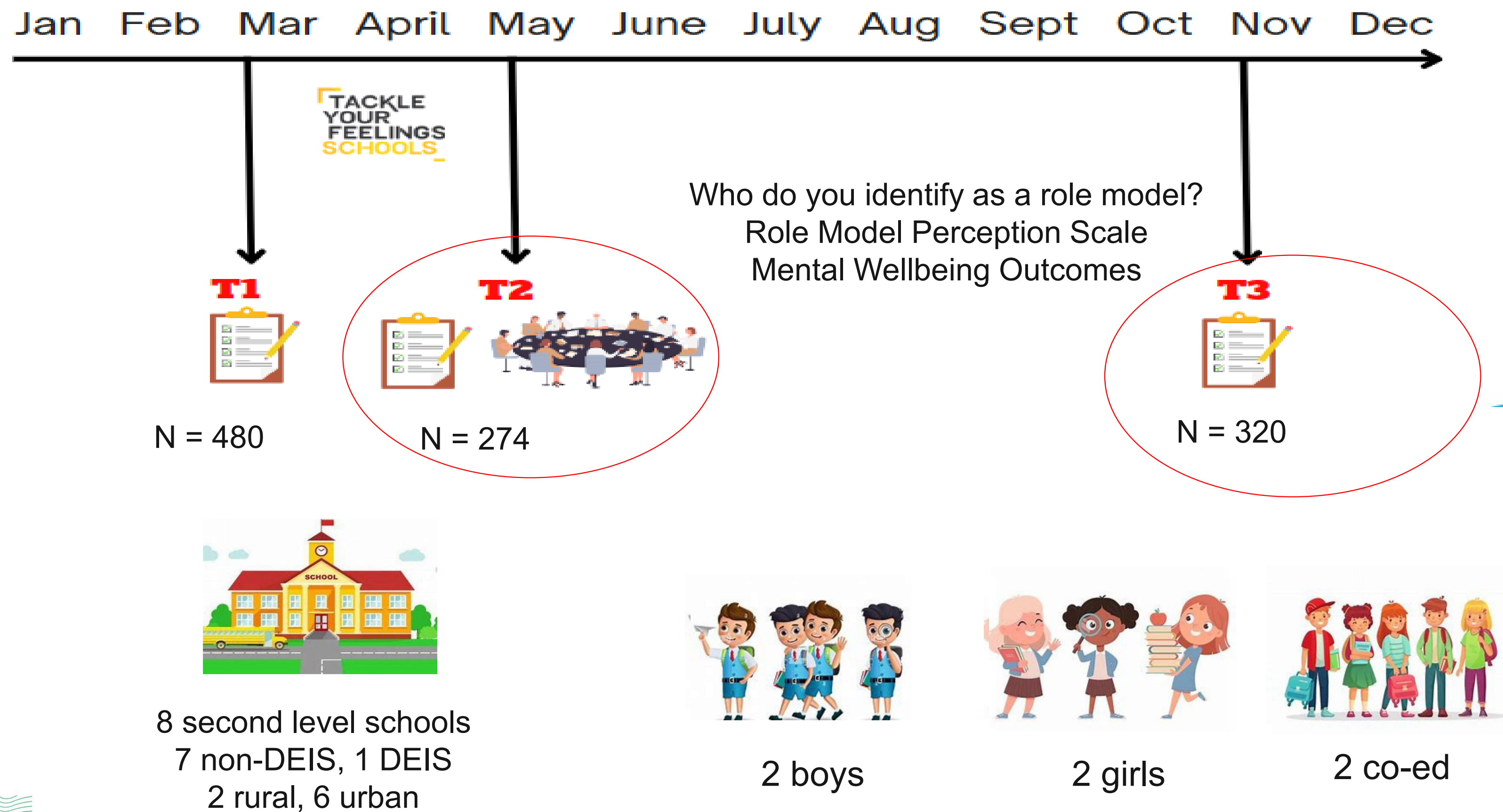
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
C1	.973		
C2	.871		
C3	.795		
C4	.784		
C5	.739		
C6	.732		
C7	.695		
F1		.905	
F2		.880	
F3		.866	
F4		.708	
F5		.701	
V1			.916
V2			.829
V3			.681



EFA: all retained items had strong factor loadings (≥ 0.681)

CFA: RMSEA = 0.07, χ^2/df = 2.45, TLI = 0.96
CFI = 0.97

Investigating feasibility of TYF Schools programme



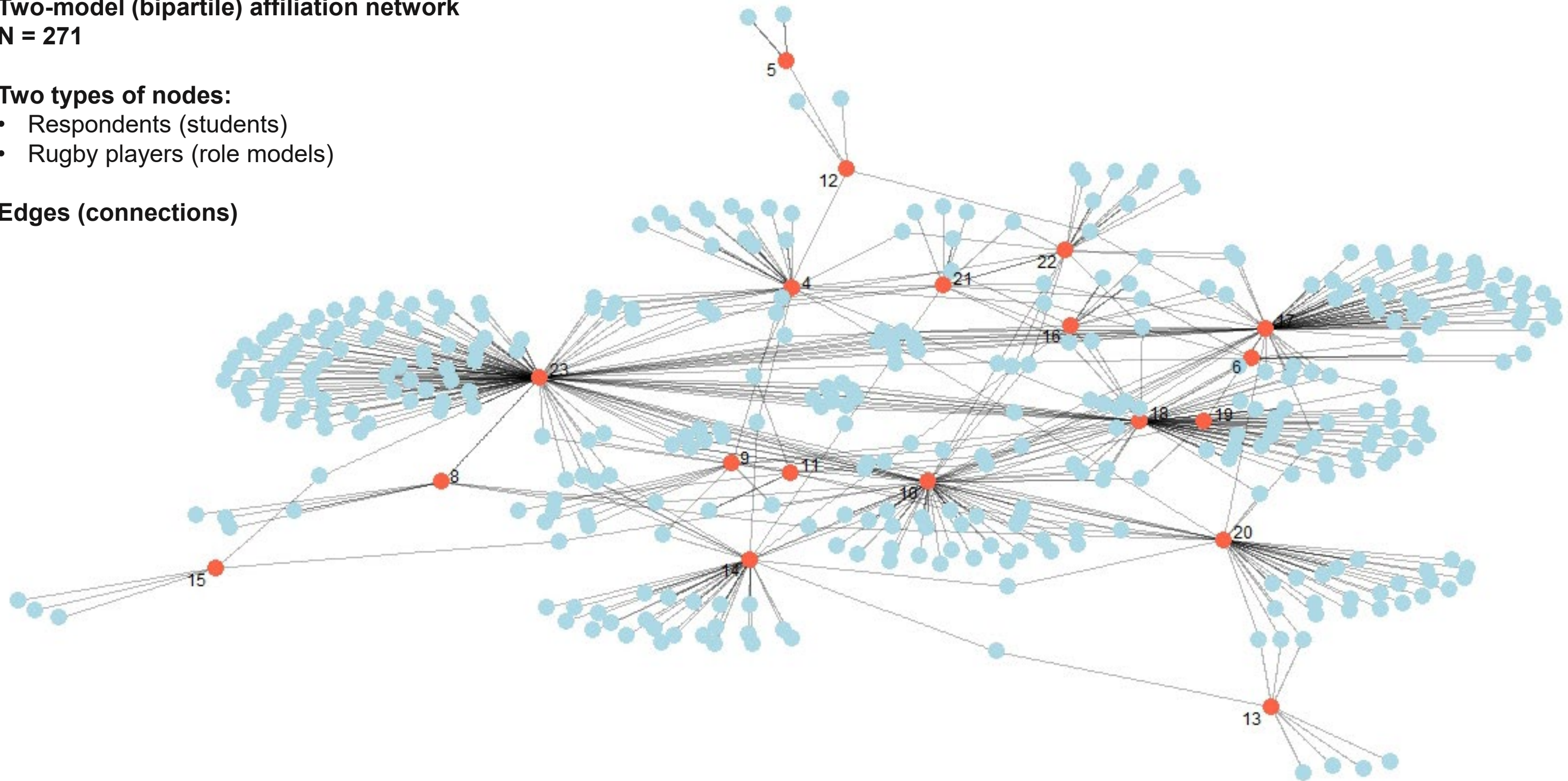
Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Two-model (bipartite) affiliation network
N = 271

Two types of nodes:

- Respondents (students)
- Rugby players (role models)

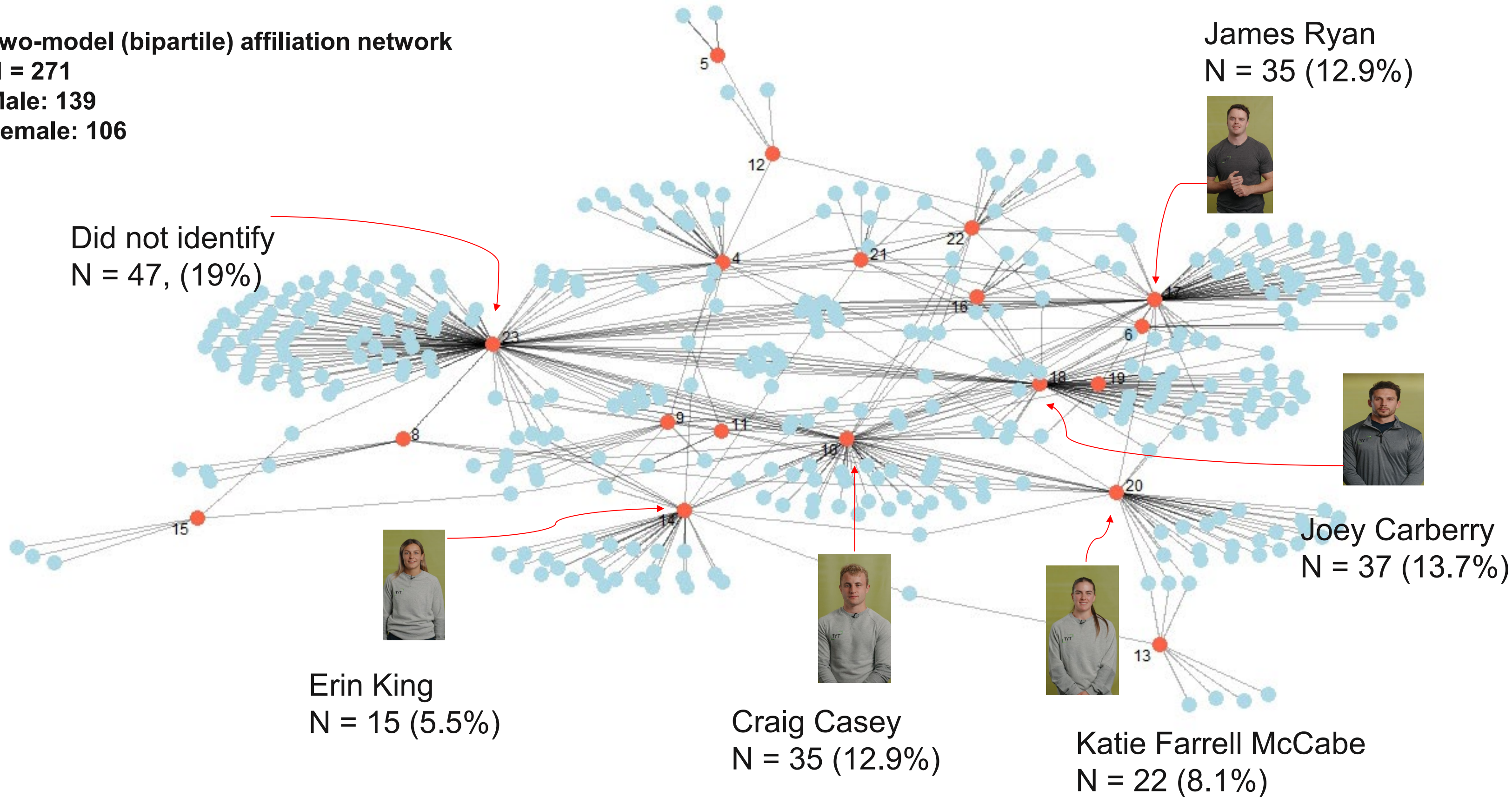
Edges (connections)



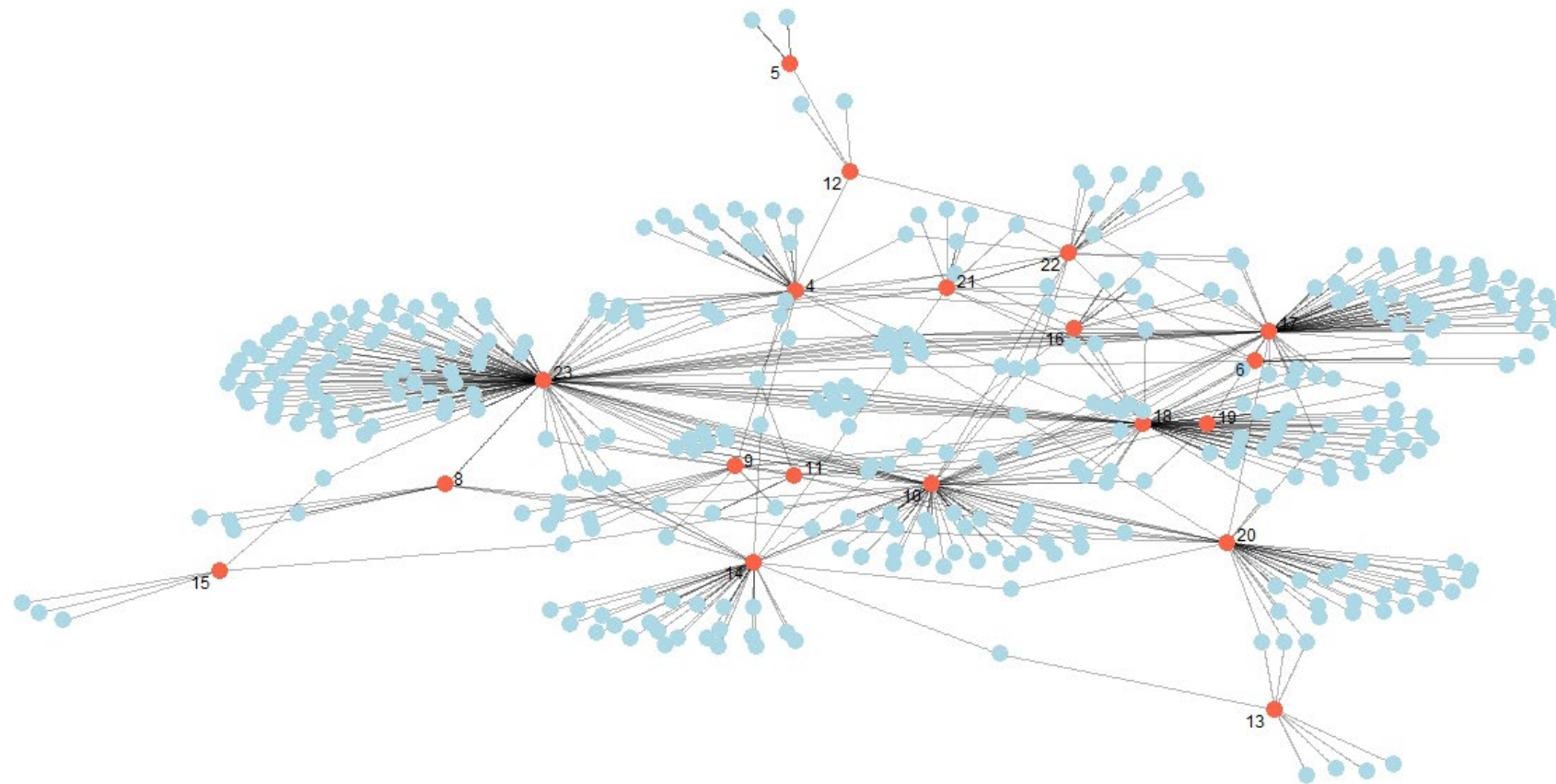
Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Two-model (bipartite) affiliation network
N = 271
Male: 139
Female: 106

Did not identify
N = 47, (19%)



Who are adolescents choosing as role models?



Most popular role models selected

- Joey Carberry (13.7%)
- James Ryan (12.9%)
- Craig Casey (12.9%)

Qualitative component

“When you see people on TV, they almost don't seem like real people. You're only thinking about them as players. But then when you see them talking about mental health, it's like, oh, they're actually just like the rest of us like talking about that sort of stuff, it makes you want to listen” (P5, FG1)

“The best thing was I liked listening to their stories...their different challenges with their mental health and how they got over it. Like Andrew Porter..and like, how he had to control his anger when he was younger” (P4, FG3)

Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Attribute based (gender) bipartite affiliation network

N = 274

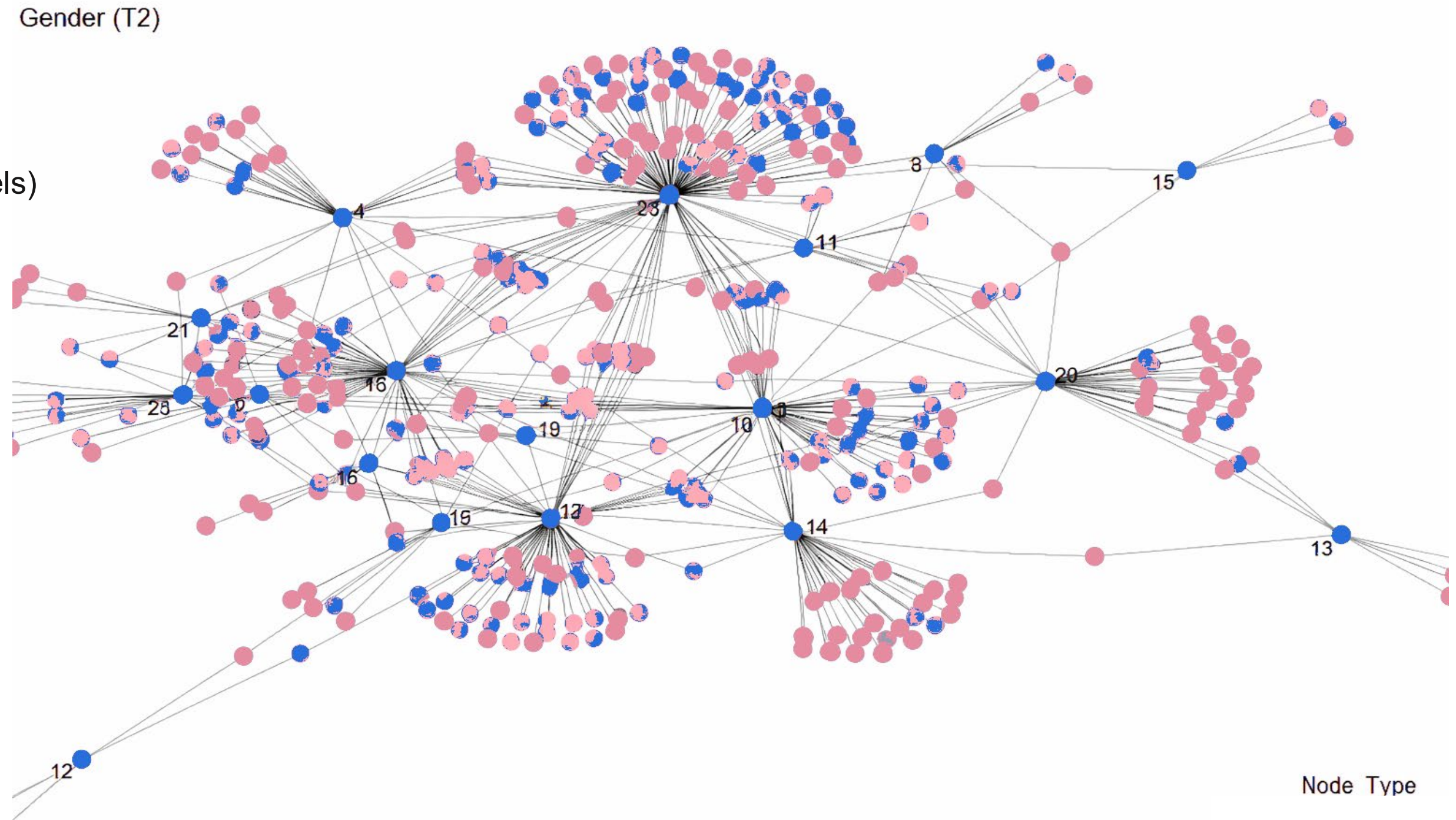
Male: 139

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Two types of nodes:

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Edges (connections)



Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Network Analysis

N = 274

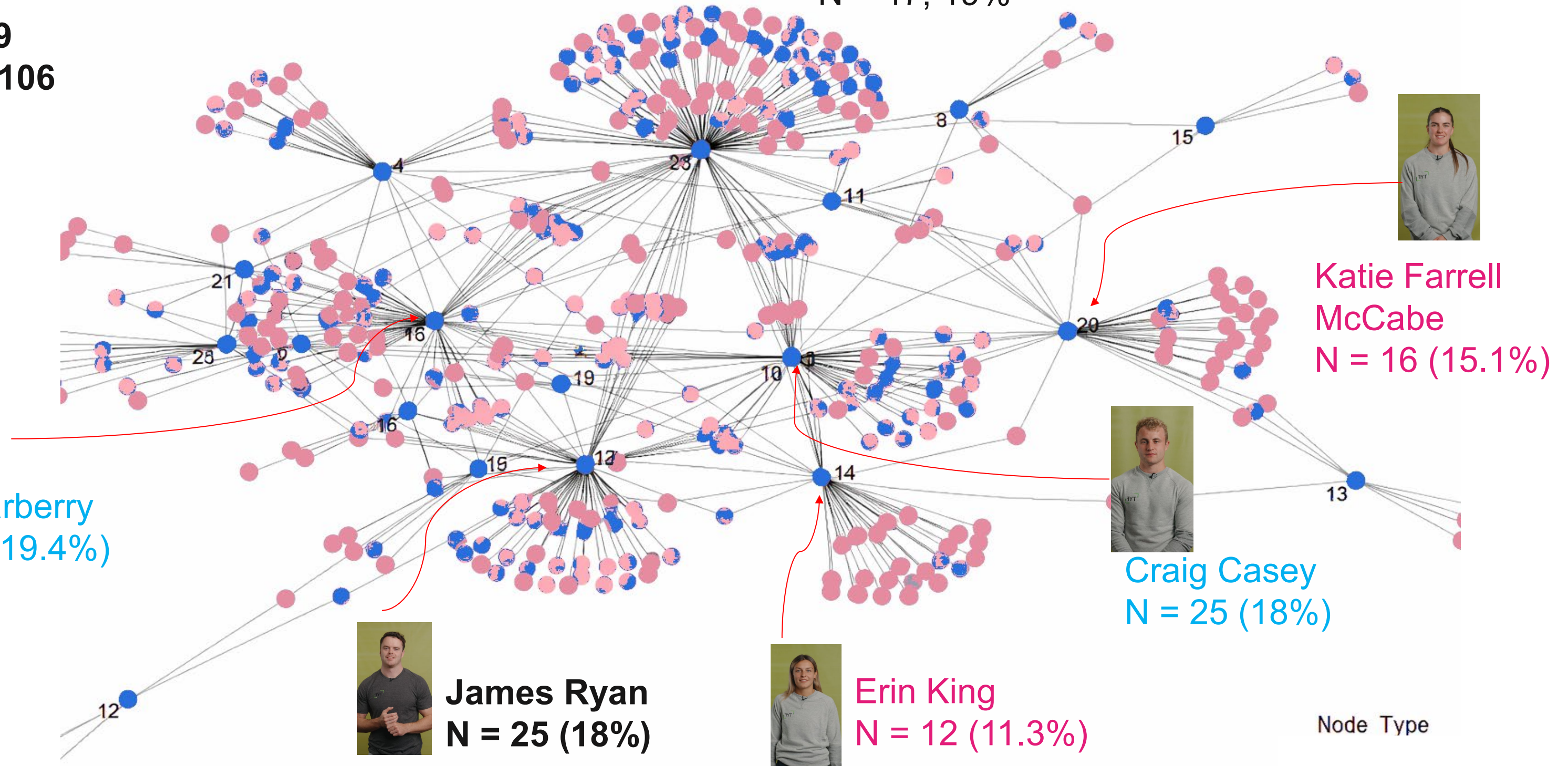
Gender (T2)

Male: 139

Female: 106

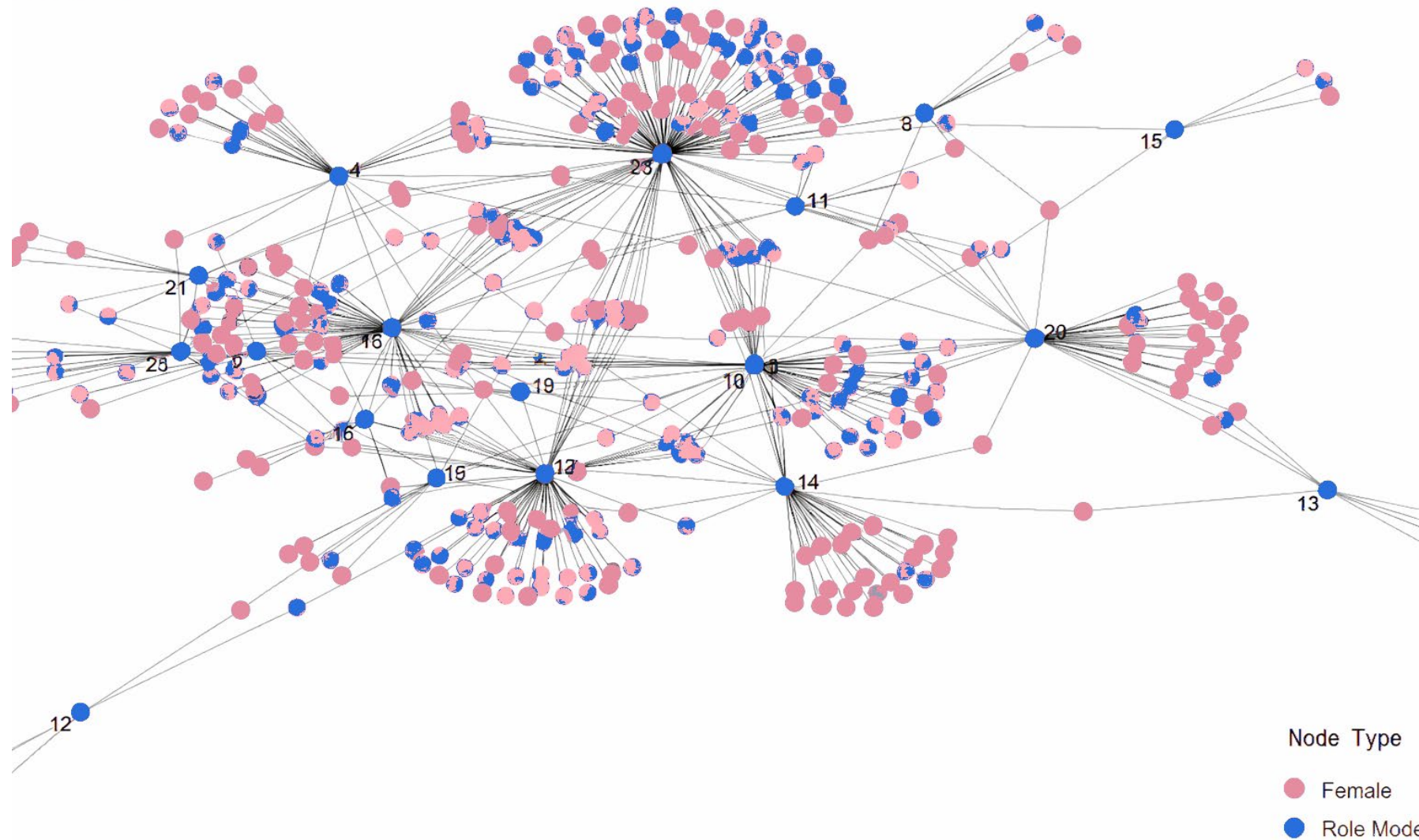
Did not identify

N = 47, 19%



Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Gender (T2)



Most popular role models selected

Males participants

- Joey Carberry
- James Ryan
- Craig Casey

Females participants

- Erin King
- Katie Farrell McCabe
- James Ryan

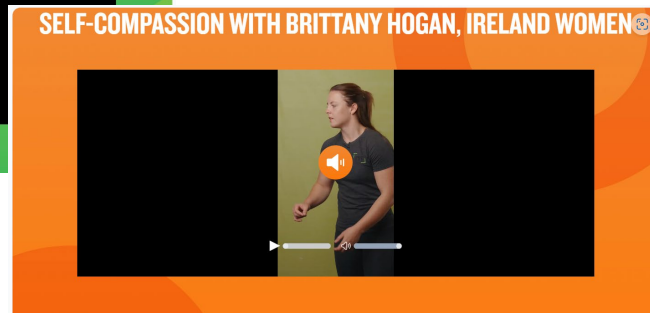
Qualitative component

“He’s a big strong man talking about his emotions and I’d say it makes it more relatable so. lads open up more often because its more likely they have role models in sports. ” (P3, FG4)

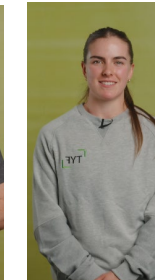
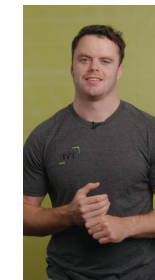
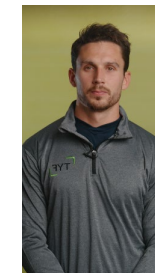
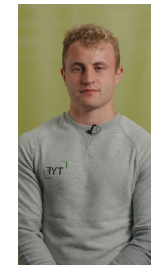
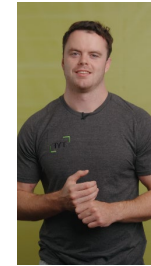
“And that they were both men and women players, men and women. Because we’re like an all girls school. And if it was just all male players it would be just different, but that they were like inclusive it good for girls so we can relate to issues we face” (P2, FG3)

Who are adolescents choosing as role models?

Implications



Notoriety and storytelling
is important for selection
of role models



Adolescents tend to
select gender matched
role models



Important to promote gender specific wellbeing behaviours

- Social activities – Female
- Help-seeking – Males
- Or ethnic/cultural/LGTBQ youth





Craig Casey

When watching this video – what makes you decide whether you would take on board what he is saying?

Values

Extent they embody values the observer admires or wishes to emulate

Credibility

How believable, trustworthy and authentic they appear

Impression

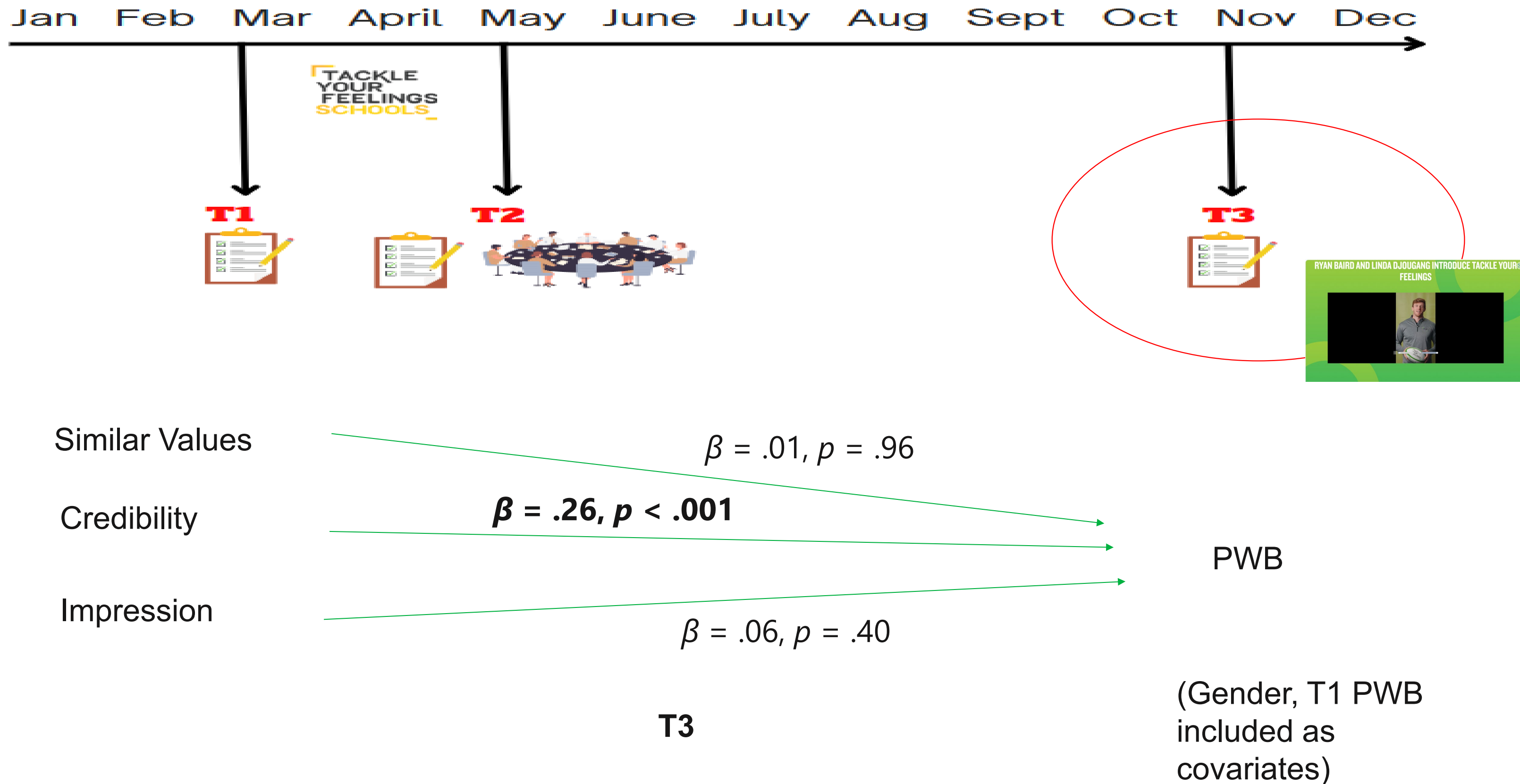
Overall impact or emotional resonance

What is driving role model influence on wellbeing?



Similar Values	$\beta = .21, p = .04$	PWB (Gender, T1 PWB included as covariates)
Credibility	$\beta = .159, p = .086$	
Impression	$\beta = .08, p = .488$	

What is driving role model influence on wellbeing?

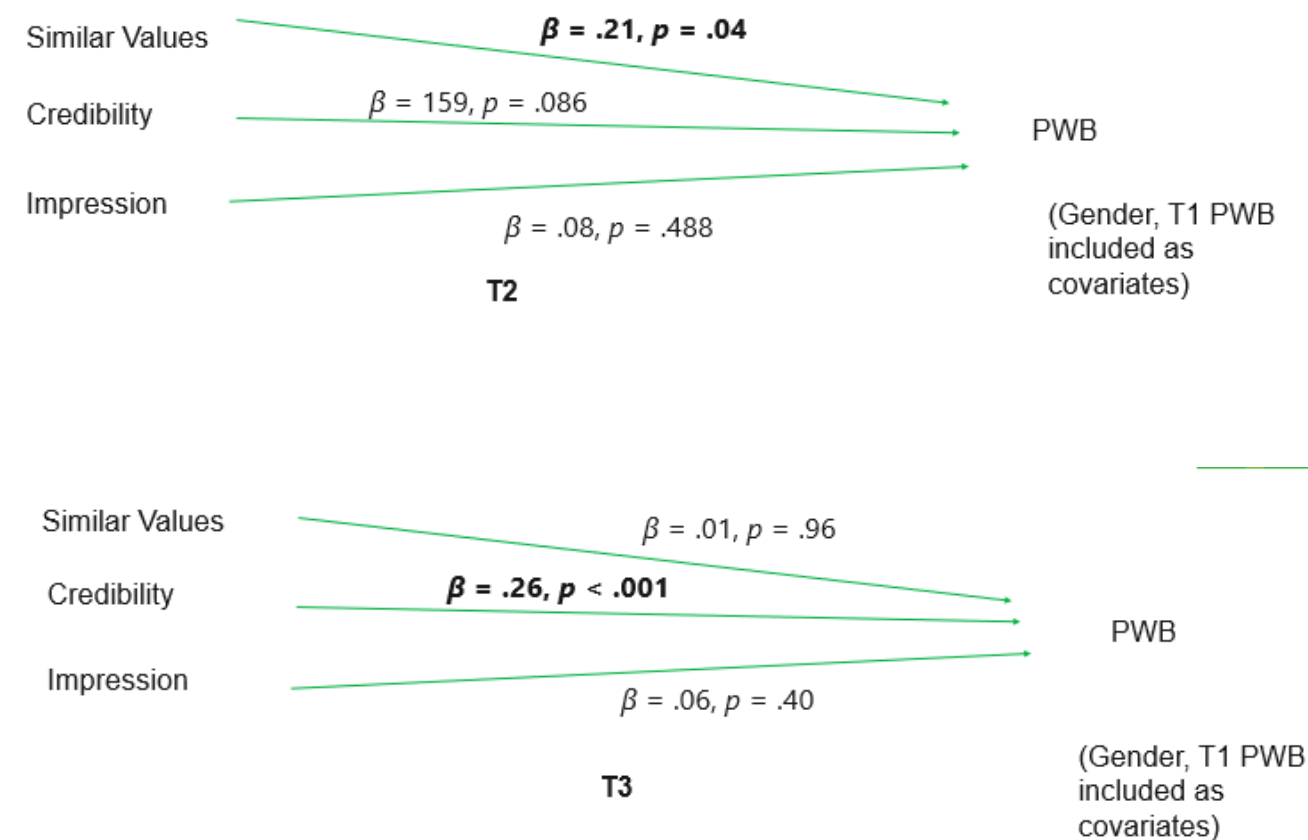


Implications

13



Adolescents tend to select gender matched role models



Using gender matched role models to model gender specific wellbeing activities.

Emphasise relatable ambassador values to adolescents

Ensure ambassadors are perceived as credible to create sustained impact

Thank you, Questions?

Email: Anna.McHale@ul.ie or Jennifer.mcmahon@ul.ie





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Anna McHale
PhD Researcher in Psychology
Interested in qualitative and quantitative research on role models, & youth mental health, digital & school-based programmes
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University of Limerick

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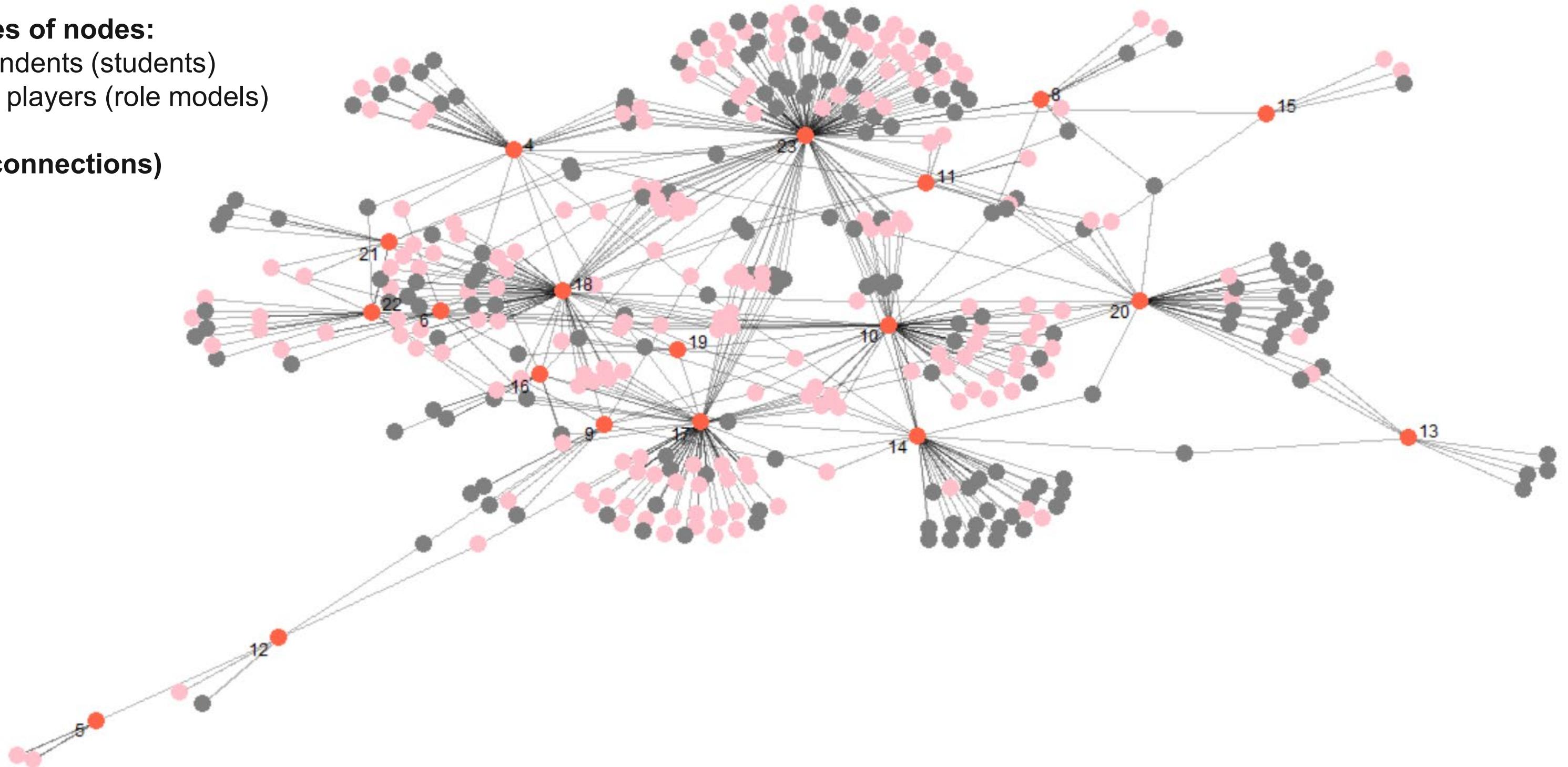
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