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MATANG^a

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7523-9049>

Karim SURYADI^b

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3492-3175>

Cecep DARMAWAN^c

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3865-542X>

Leni ANGGRAENI^d

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1382-8731>

Sport fans using social media: A study on celebrity sports fans

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Fani sportu korzystający z mediów społecznościowych: badanie dotyczące fanów gwiazd sportu

Streszczenie

Media społecznościowe stały się bardzo ważną platformą dla fanów sportu, sportowców, klubów i drużyn. Niniejsze badanie stanowi kompleksowy przegląd rozwoju badań nad mediami społecznościowymi, jaki nastąpił w ostatniej dekadzie, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sposobu, w jaki fani sportu wykorzystują tę technologię do realizowania swoich zainteresowań. Celem ba-

^a PhD candidate Study Program of Civic Education, Indonesia University of Education, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: matang@upi.edu (corresponding author)

^b Professor in Political Communication, Indonesia University of Education, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: karimsuryadi@upi.edu

^c Professor in Political Science, Indonesia University of Education, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: cecep darmawan@upi.edu

^d PhD in Department of Civic Education, Indonesia University of Education, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: lenianggraeni@upi.edu

dania jest przyjrzenie się, w jaki sposób fani sportu korzystają z mediów społecznościowych, aby nawiązać kontakt ze swoimi ulubionymi sportowcami i drużynami, identyfikacja odpowiednich teorii i koncepcji wyjaśniających znaczenie mediów społecznościowych dla fanów sportu oraz analiza zachowań i interakcji fanów sportu w mediach społecznościowych. Na podstawie przeglądu 29 wybranych artykułów badanie wykazało, że media społecznościowe służą fanom jako środek wyrażania ich uwielbienia dla danej gwiazdy, a ich tożsamość i interakcje w mediach społecznościowych są określone przez teorię użytkowania i gratyfikacji, która jest powszechnie stosowana w badaniach skupiających się na fanach i mediach społecznościowych. Z badania wynika także, że wśród fanów pojawił się feminizm sportowy.

Chociaż przypadki rasistowskich komentarzy i zachowań wśród zagorzałych kibiców pozostają niewątpliwym minusem ich aktywności, niezwykle istotne jest zbadanie znaczenia umiejętności cyfrowych wśród fanów sportu.

Słowa kluczowe: fandom, fani celebrytów, fani sportu, media społecznościowe.

Abstract

Social media has become an essential platform for sports fans, athletes, clubs, and teams. This study provides a comprehensive review of the last decade's research developments in social media, with a particular focus on how sports fans utilize this technology to engage with their interests. The study's objectives are to explore how sports fans use social media to connect with their favorite athletes and teams, identify relevant theories and concepts that explain the significance of social media for sports fans, and analyze sports fans' behavior and interactions on social media. Based on a review of 29 selected articles, the study finds that social media serves as a means for fans to express their fandom and that their identities and interactions on social media are framed by use and gratification theory, which is commonly employed in fan and social media research. Additionally, the study reveals that sports feminism has emerged among fans. While instances of racist comments and behavior among diehard fans remain a downside, it is crucial to investigate the importance of digital literacy among sports fans.

Keywords: fandom, celebrity fans, sports fans, social media.

Introduction

Social media has become a prevalent medium for fans to connect with their idols, offering advantages that cultivate commitment and loyalty (M. Kim & Kim, 2020). Fans' commitment and loyalty have become a new aspect in celebrity culture promoted by social media (a new celebrity culture) (Redhead, 2019). This phenomenon was previously promoted by the mass media and newspapers (Owens, 2016). John Street defines a celebrity as a person who speaks out about politics and claims the right to represent people (Street, 2004). In the new era of social media, loyal fans create hashtags (#) and trending. The positive impact on fans' lives is mediated by attitudes and motivation to use social media (Yuan et al., 2016), specifically as a personal factor in terms of individual fantasies (Liebers & Straub, 2020). Attitudes, motivations, and fan fantasies are then filled with self-disclosure of idol figures on their social media accounts. Self-disclosure

related to work, personal life with friends and family, and fans' retweeting behavior on social media has influenced parasocial interactions with their idol figures (Kim & Song, 2016).

Social media is important for sports fans and idols (Yoo, 2021). The presence of social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) makes their relationship even closer. Idols use it as a channel to communicate with their fans (Filo et al., 2015). Posts, tweets, or comments published as a branding tool display a positive image, so building closeness with old fans and attracting new fans are significant. Besides, a good account management will benefit them by incorporating advertisements and business (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). For example, the social media accounts of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo bring fans closer to their idols. There are several reasons and motivations for sports fans to follow their idols on social media. They get fun and friendship, thus they can participate in conveying voices, and share information with other fans (Vimieiro, 2018).

Loneliness is a factor causing fans to continue to follow their idols on social media (Kim et al., 2019). In addition to personality factors, it is more concerned with the type and clarity of content shared by celebrities (Annamalai et al., 2021). The clarity of content shared by idols contributes to fan engagement, i.e. likes, comments, shares, and positive responses. Fascination with fans appears to be strongest in early adolescence (Brooks, 2021). This period is justified because teenagers are looking for idols other than their parents in the process of forming their own identity.

Social media mediation as parasocial interaction and celebrity worship influence fans' attitudes toward brands, advertisements, and shopping intentions (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Rachmattie et al., 2022; Singh & Banerjee, 2019). The idols on social media are considered proven to influence fans in their decision to repurchase products, support brands and products they recommend (Kim et al., 2015; Yuan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2020), including sports ones (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Social media mediation with idols also continues when a given idol dies. When they pass away, it is not only grief and sorrow that fans will experience but also the importance of maintaining health to avoid what happened to their idol (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016).

Fan loyalty to idols is interesting to study, especially as far as sports fans are concerned and how social media mediates them. The growth of social media has facilitated for sports fans accessing information about their idols, which is viewed positively in increasing interpersonal relationships with idols as well as supporting sports teams (MacPherson & Kerr, 2019; Stavros et al., 2014). For this reason, social media is a means of interaction between fans, idols, and sports teams in terms of reciprocity.

Nowadays, fans have new channels of social media to interact with their idols through short message service (SMS), chat, direct messaging (DM), inbox,

live streaming, etc. Social media channels have transformed media technology and triggered a shift in digital practices (Sturm, 2020). Previously, media (i.e. television) were seen as semi-participatory as far as fans and idols were concerned. They were regarded as “passive” subjects in this one-way communication. YouTube is the evidence of migration to this new media, coupled with the characteristics of the current younger generation of digital natives (Kuyucu, 2019; Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013). Furthermore, it can be discerned in fans’ various activities, their identity, and fandoms located in the media channels that they can reach.

Fans and fandoms are those who always follow their idols that could be both sportspeople and activists (Gray et al., 2017). The concept of fans which was previously viewed by the media as passive has now shifted to being active and engaged in critical fan practices. The shift in fandom practices gave rise to two spaces, namely “offline” and “online”(Woods & Ludvigsen, 2021). This is because social media provides space for fandoms to channel their interactions and identities. Previously, fandoms met and gathered in groups limited in number, but now the internet network expands fandom groups so that several sports teams have foreign fans. It is not only a limited group that they have, but also a larger range of fans.

The idol identity can be explained by social identity theory (Humphries & Kucek, 2019). Those who claim to be fans highlight their identity more than others (fanatics). The fandom that develops through network interaction and social integration can have its origins in the role of fans’ environment (i.e. parents) (Tinson et al., 2017). Parenting patterns can also be closely related with fandom identity similarities. For example, parents who attend their favorite team’s soccer match involve their children in watching and enjoying the game. On the other hand, fandom practices are gender biased (McInroy & Craig, 2018; Poczta & Malchrowicz-Moško, 2019). This can make it difficult for some to participate and explore their idol’s identity.

Social media is a very useful channel for fans to interact and show their fandom identity. On the other hand, it has disadvantages for fans. Previous research has explained that social media can cause conflict (Matang et al., 2022), both personal and interpersonal. Fans can get addicted, which leads to a conflict with their parents. Another study also emphasizes that conflicts may occur due to negative comment disputes among fans on social media, even racist attacks from fellow football fans (Cleland, 2013; Ilhan et al., 2018).

Using various descriptions of fans, fandoms, and social media mediation, this study attempted to investigate how sports fans use social media to connect with their idols and their favorite sports teams, which theories and concepts can explain the importance of social media for sports fans, and the interaction and behavior of sports fans on social media.

Methods

This study used a literature review (Bowden-Green et al., 2021; Sharma & Gupta, 2021). Articles are searched from the big five databases (Elsevier, Springer-Verlag, Taylor and Francis, John Wiley and Sons, and Sage Publications). Articles in English and Publication date from 2011-2021. The following search keyword topics were used: “fan” AND “social media” OR “fans” AND “social media” OR “fandom” AND “social media” OR “Sport fan” AND “social media” OR “Sports fans” AND “social media” OR “Sport fandom” AND “social media” OR “celebrity” AND “social media”. The search results as shown in Fig. 1. N = 29 was the final search result with the exception of articles not included in the topic of Sports Fans and social media and excluded articles published before 2011. Table 1 is the result of the identification of fans and social media by bringing up various themes and theories that are used in fan research and social media. The coding of the study sub-themes shows the links and relationships that had similar findings and study variables for sports fans and social media. The results and findings are discussed further.

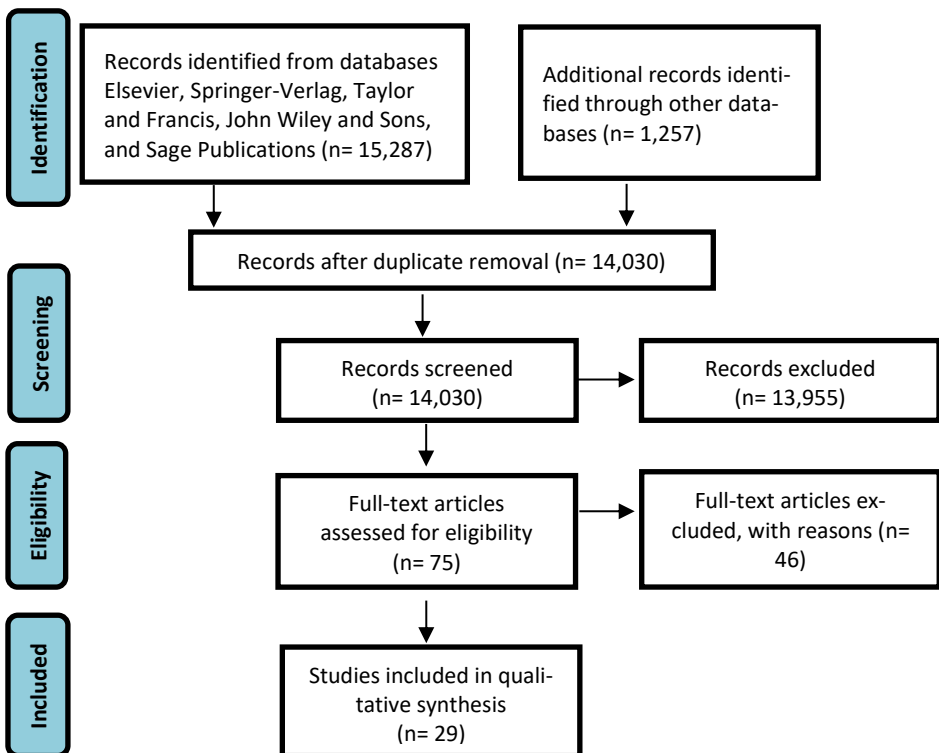


Fig. 1

PRISMA flow diagram

Source: own research.

Table 1
Identified themes for Fans and Social Media

N	Sub-theme	Code	Theory	
Sturm (2020)	Fan engagement	Digital sports fandom	Social identity theory	
Annamalai, et al. (2021)		Fan attachment		
Zadeh (2021)		Interaction and engagement through social media content		
Checchinato, et al. (2015)	Football clubs and fans			
Mudrick, et al. (2016)	Social media on fan reactions	Fans with team identification		
Fan, et al. (2020)		Fan identification		
Cranmer, et al. (2019)				
Vale & Fernandes (2018)	Driving fan engagement	Sports fans' engagement with clubs on social media		Uses and Gratifications
Kim, et al. (2021)	Twitter followers			
Levental, et al. (2016)	Fans interacting			Braithwaite's Theory
Cleland (2014)		Racist fans		
MacPherson & Kerr (2021)	Fans' responses	Negative consequences of interactions on social media		
Avalos, & Dori-Hacohen (2018)		Criticism and consensus		
Fenton, et al. (2021)				
Toffoletti, et al. (2021)	Female sports fans	Female fandom	Theories of social capital	
Kunert (2021)				
Pavlidis, et al. (2020)		Female fans' experience		
Gong & Wang (2021)	Sports fans' behavior while using social media	Women displaying their fandom on social media	Uses and gratifications	
Williams, et al. (2014)				
Toder-Alon, et al. (2019)	Sports fans	Old fans	Theory of interpersonal behavior	
Kim, Cho, & Kim (2021)		Using #hashtags		
Clavio & Walsh (2014)				
Spinda & Puckette (2018)	Fan following	Sports fans' use of social media	Uses and gratifications	
Wakefield & Bennett (2018)	Sports fans' experience			
Stavros, et al. (2014)	Sports fans' motivations	Fans' motivations to engage and interact		
Billings, et al. (2017)				
Jackson & Thaker (2021)	Sport fans' reactions	Fan loyalty		
Wulf, et al. (2017)	Social media professionals			
Parganas, et al. (2015)		Sports brands		

Source: own research.

Results and Discussion

The Relationship between Sports Fans and Fandom, and the Presence of Social Media

There are three powers of social media (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). Firstly, it is the power of information. Personally, idols can convey information quickly through posts and live on their accounts. After the game, idols convey emotions, feelings of happiness or sadness, while the confirmation of club transfer and some important information is delivered to fans. Fans capture the moment by sharing information with other fans (Kim et al., 2019). Secondly, it is the power of interaction. The power of interaction can be seen in the number of likes and comments posted by idols. Idols can also perform live online interaction with fans. Thirdly, it is the power of inspiration. The success stories of the sports figures such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are posted on social media, providing an inspiration for their fans to follow the success of their idols.

The relationship between sports fans and idols is getting stronger with the presence of social media. Pica-Smith provides an example of the COVID-19 times (Pica-Smith et al., 2019). On social media, idols fostered support for fans and adherence to public health, welfare, and community life. They shared how they had overcome the pandemic and hoped for a better future. The success of a sports celebrity is building relationships with their fans. Finally, it can lead to mobilizing fans into forms of activism and philanthropy (Hayat et al., 2020), making sports fans and idols realize their power to drive change as citizens.

The contribution of social media to fostering relationships between sports fans and idols (Filo et al., 2015) increases parasocial interactions with idols (Kim & Song, 2016). Interactions that go well for both parties create a closer psychological relationship. Then, psychological friendship increases the loyalty of sports fans. Fans' loyalty is a motivation for idols to make the best contributions. The presence of social media makes the relationship between sports fans and idols even closer (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016).

Sports Fans Using Social Media

The development of social media has given sports fans an opportunity to connect with their favorite idols and teams (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). Various platforms make it easier for sports fans to observe their idols' daily activities and allow them to express their identities as fans and fandoms (Mudrick et al., 2016). They follow their idols' and sports teams' social media accounts as a form of identity, expression, and interaction (Kim et al., 2021). It is natural for the social media accounts of idol figures and sports teams to have many followers. On these social media accounts, fans and fandoms gather to interact and get information.

Sports fans use social media to follow their idols' and sports teams' social media accounts. It is a form of their fandom identity and the way to get the latest information that can be seen in uploaded idols' and sports teams' accounts. Information comes not only from idols' and sports teams' social media accounts but can also be obtained in the form of hashtags (Kim et al., 2019). Information in hashtags (#) is usually popular on social media. This kind of information is a way of conveying the news to fellow fandoms. It develops the identity of fellow fandoms and shares information so that others are not left out.

The results of the study reveal that the motive in following idols' and teams' social media accounts is convenience and comfort in providing information (Spinda & Puckette, 2017). In addition, the motivation of sports fans to follow their idols' and teams' social media accounts is entertainment, integration, and social interaction, as well as identity as a fandom (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). The need for information is a relatively new aspect when it comes to social media. This is because social media conveys information directly and in real-time quickly. As evidence, social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) provide live streaming services. Idols can immediately greet their fans, build relationships, and display their surroundings and activities. On idols' and sports teams' social media accounts two-way communication can also be built.

Traditionally, sports celebrities communicated with fans through television, radio, and newspapers. In the modern context, it is a new celebrity culture flourishing through social media (Coppa, 2013; Redhead, 2019). Idols promote opinions, goals, and values to their fans and society. Likewise, communication and interaction between idols and fans is a clear illustration of parasocial theory. This is an important role of social media for fans. Fans can continue to be connected with their idols, even though they are limited by region, geography, and country. In this case, various theories and concepts can explain why sports fans use social media.

Theories on Sports Fans and Social Media Studies

Various theories are used to explain the phenomenon of fans using social media. These theories are social identity theory, Braithwaite's Theory, Theories of social capital, Theory of interpersonal behavior, and Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G). The last theory seems to be the one that researchers often use in their studies. U&G is a commonly used theory in exploring social media use (Ferris et al., 2021; Ifinedo, 2016; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The argument for the importance of using U&G theory in social media research is that this theory is relevant to both conventional and modern media. Ruggiero argued that U&G theory always provides up-to-date theoretical approaches to media, such as newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and today's media (i.e. social media) (Ruggiero, 2000).

The experts who often refer to U&G theory are Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch. Their work *Uses and Gratifications Research* revealed several important assumptions of U&G. Firstly, there is a typology of audience satisfaction. Different media, content, material, or culture will produce a certain typology of audience satisfaction. Media is a place to escape from routine, release emotions, and connect with other people, ranging from family, friends, nations, and others. Secondly, satisfaction and needs should be mentioned. Gratification research is close to the needs of the media in the sense that the media has been observed to satisfy audiences. Thirdly, the media is a source of gratification. Audience satisfaction can be obtained from three different sources, namely media content, media exposure, and social contexts that describe different media exposure situations. For example, the need to relax or kill time can be satisfied by watching television or reading. Further on, there is gratification and media attributes. Media with different or similar attributes are more likely to serve different or similar needs. Media attributes are perceptual or intrinsic. The extent to which consumers perceive media attributes and their intrinsic qualities is correlated with the pursuit of certain satisfaction which the audience needs. Psychological, sociological, and environmental factors determine media use. There can be also different sources of one's needs' satisfaction. Media content can serve various audience needs and functions, such as social functions, empathy, and escapism. Last but not least, one can mention gratification and effects. Certain media broadcast fictitious content that is intended to entertain but is not socially real. Of the various important assumptions that have been put forward, Katz and his colleagues finally suggest that a media enthusiast studies human needs to find out to what extent the media contributes to their creation and satisfaction (Katz et al., 1973).

U&G describes the processes and reasons for choosing certain media to meet users' needs (Ifinedo, 2016). In this case, social media is considered capable of meeting the personal and social needs of its users. They need to connect with old friends, make new friends, they need (to be) a source of information and entertainment, and connect with their favorite idols and teams (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Vale & Fernandes, 2017). The need for social media is also seen as the users' satisfaction that will ultimately have an impact on the intention of sports fans to continue using social media (Bae, 2018). The use of social media is then seen as an identity in interacting with sports fans.

Apart from U&G theory, fans' identity can also be seen in hashtags. The theory of interpersonal behavior confirms that sports fans share information through social media (H. S. Kim et al., 2019). Triandis states that fan behavior is influenced by intentions, which in turn are influenced by perceived consequences, social factors, and influence (Triandis, 1977). Sports fans tend to use

social media to develop emotional connections. Hashtags demonstrate their motivation and intention to take on fan identity. The motivation to share information creates feelings of pleasure and joy. This motivation fosters sports fan engagement and engagement through social media content.

Identity, Interaction and Behavior of Sports Fans on Social Media

The interaction and engagement of sports fans through social media content contribute to developing the relationship between fans and their favorite teams (Annamalai et al., 2021; Zadeh, 2021). Social media's importance is also demonstrated by its ability to mobilize sports fans for civic movements, as well as in purchase intentions towards brand attributes that are broadcast on idols' and teams' official social media accounts (Checchinato et al., 2015; Levental et al., 2016; Parganas et al., 2015). Good relations between both parties, i.e. fans and idols, then become an advantage for third parties as attribute providers in marketing products on social media. For this reason, many business people conduct a partnership with idols and sports teams in marketing their products.

The content broadcast by idols and teams strengthens fan loyalty (Wulf et al., 2017). This is evident on sports fans' and teams' social media accounts before and after matches (Gong & Wang, 2021; Williams et al., 2014). The behavior pattern of fans reflects the value of friendship and expectations in their relationship. Sports fans who have positive experiences with their team will share them on their social media accounts (Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). When the fandom gets good results from their favorite team's match, they will broadcast it as a form of identification with the team's fandom. Reactions and responses can vary, i.e. could show support or disapproval (Cranmer et al., 2019). Sports fans will negotiate fandoms of successful idols and teams, otherwise, rarely reveal fandoms of idols and teams if they are not successful.

Sports fans who display their fandoms on social media are not always male. Several research results reveal that female sports fans use social media to demonstrate their fandoms (Pavlidis et al., 2020). Female sports fans use social media as a platform to facilitate the development of their fandom community, which is dominated by male sports fandom discourse. Feminism studies on sports fans finally opened up insights into the importance of reflecting the identity of female fandoms on social media (Fenton et al., 2021). Women's sports fandoms use social media to represent themselves in their fandoms. The presence of female fans may offer an alternative approach (Pope, 2018). It challenges the culture that sees sports fans as violent and only male. The identity of these female fans can be seen through the posts and interactions of fellow fans.

The interactions between sports fans and idols are not always positive. When idols perform actions that violate norms and morals, there will be a with-

drawal of support from their fans (Archer, 2021; MacPherson & Kerr, 2019). There have even been instances of idol-shaming criticism and expressions of disappointment shown by sports fans on social media (Fischer & Mohrman, 2020; Jackson & Thaker, 2021). On the other hand, interactions among fandoms are not always good either. The research results reveal that interaction of sports fans on social media can lead to racist attacks (Cleland, 2013) such as rejecting multiculturalism. Thus, racist cases are also present on social media (Fischer & Mohrman, 2020) making sports fans face the dark side of their engagement on the Internet. For this reason, it seems important to increase knowledge and understanding of particular phenomena regarding sports events so that social media can be used wisely.

Conclusion

Social media has become an important platform for sports fans to engage, interact and connect with their favorite idols and teams. It is a new means to show fandom identity and obtain the latest information by following idols' and fans' favorite teams' social media accounts. The phenomenon of sports fans using social media can be explained by Uses and Gratifications theory. The use of social media is chosen by sports fans because it has various perceived gratifications. The information obtained can be valid and provided directly because of the existence of official social media accounts for idols and teams so that two-way communication can occur between sports fans and their idols, as well as creating a place for fellow fandoms to display their identity.

The use of social media by sports fans is not always viewed positively. Embarrassing criticism of idols and teams, withdrawals of endorsements, and expressions of disappointment can also occur on social media, as well as racist incidents and brawls among sports fans. For this reason, further research is expected to provide knowledge and insight into the importance of being a healthy sports fan. In other words, the study of social media literacy (Celik et al., 2021; Festl, 2021; Nagle, 2018) must be realized by sports fans. The negative influence of freedom of expression on social media that harms oneself and others should be minimized. This literature study has weaknesses because the search for the studies was limited to five databases and journal articles published before 2011 were not included in this study.

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