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## Interactive Effects of Perceived Organizational Politics and Hierarchical Status on Workplace Victimization

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**Abstract** *Drawing on deviant place theory, we examined the role of organizational politics in workplace victimization while considering the moderating effect of employees' hierarchical status in the context of higher educational institutions in Pakistan. Data were collected from 313 employees occupying various positions in the teaching faculty of selected universities in Lahore. The survey instrument consisted of existing validated scales to measure the proposed variable; the same was also found consistently reliable in this study. We performed correlation, simple regression, and multiple regression analyses to test hypotheses. Organizational politics indicated to represent a positive association of workplace victimization. The moderated model explained significant variance in workplace victimization indicating that victimization initiated by organizational politics varied with the positional status that the victim holds in the hierarchy. We suggest a political climate should be discouraged to prevent negative outcomes of victimization at work.*

**Key Words:** Organizational politics, employee status, workplace victimization

### Introduction

Workplace victimization and associated terms have received growing attention in organizational research. Laws banning various forms of victimization at work are being encouraged worldwide (Hackney & Perrewé, 2018). These behaviors not only affect the wellbeing of individuals by keeping certain psychological needs unmet i.e. sense of belongingness and ability to trust others but additionally produce adverse impacts on overall organizational performance (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). It equally affects individuals' emotional and physical levels by causing headaches, depression, blood pressure, loss of concentration, and low appetite (Amponsah & Annor, 2017). A productive relationship has also been reported between exposure to bullying and suicidal tendencies in individuals (Balducci et al., 2009; Hansen et al. 2018). These negative outcomes therefore make it an important phenomenon to investigate. The victimization also refers to bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1997), aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), incivility (Cortina et al., 2001), social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), interpersonal deviance (Berry et al., 2007), and ostracism (Williams, 2007). Organizations need to undertake necessary measures for employees' wellness which includes emotional, social, and physical wellness since it predicts productivity at work (Qaisar, Mariam, & Ahmad, 2018). To develop strategies for preventing negative outcomes of workplace victimization, the extant literature strongly suggests examining antecedents, mechanisms, and conditions which operate to induce

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workplace victimization. This sets the Ground for the study exploring the interactive role of organizational politics and hierarchical status in predicting victimization within the context of higher education in Pakistan.

## **Problem Statement**

Higher educational institutions seek to provide its people (both staff and students) with a friendly and healthy learning environment. However, they are plagued by multiple acts of intimidation and workplace terror owing to different reasons i.e. diversity, competitions, unemployment, economic downturns, and victimization culture. Some people may be more vulnerable as targets of victimization than others (Scott & Judge, 2013). Studies show that compared with personal characteristics i.e. personality traits, work environment factors such as organizational politics strongly influence the occurrence of victimization at work (Amponsah-Tawiah & Annor, 2017). Literature also indicates that power structures in groups are related to victimization (Babarro et al., 2017) and that status hierarchies influence negative ties formation (Rubineau, Lim, & Neblo, 2019). The research, however, lacks evidence indicating convergence of organizational politics and hierarchical status in predicting workplace victimization. This suggests a need to examine these relationships for creating peaceful workplaces and to mitigate the consequences of victimization. Whether these behaviors are intentional or unintentional becomes less important when investigating from the target's perspective. Therefore, for the sake of parsimony, we focused on a mild level of victimization in the form of bullying and incivility being two very common workplace behaviors.

## **Research Questions**

Perpetrators of victimization choose their targets randomly; some people are more likely to be targeted than others for different reasons. The study of such factors alongside the receiving end of victimization equation (i.e. target or victim) will broaden the theory of workplace victimization. Taking into account the employees' hierarchical status, perceptions of politics and personal experiences of victimization, two questions guided this study; (1) what is the nature of the relationship between organizational politics and workplace victimization in universities?, and (2) does victims' hierarchical status play a moderating role in organizational politics and victimization relationship?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study replicates and extends the existing research on victimization in three ways. First, there is a lack of applied research on victimization outside the corporate sector. Acknowledging the need for healthy social interactions in educational settings, this study is an attempt to examine everyday social (antisocial) behaviors i.e. victimization in the form of bullying and incivility among university-level teaching faculties. Secondly, the considerable focus of research in Pakistan has remained on extreme forms of workplace victimizing behaviors i.e. sexual harassment. It excluded the voice of those who experience a lower or moderate level of intimidation. This study is an attempt to fill this gap by operationalizing workplace victimization in terms of moderate aggressive behaviors like bullying and incivility. Thirdly, this study has examined less researched hierarchical status in the context of organizational politics and workplace victimization. The findings of this study are expected to help create friendly and conducive workplace cultures by taking necessary measures to prevent politics and victimizations at work.

## **Literature Review**

### **Workplace Victimization**

Aquino and Thau (2009) defined victimization as the incidents in which physical or psychological harm to others at work is caused by individuals by using words or actions. It refers to any behavior that impairs employees' essential psychological needs (Dash & Jena, 2019). Workplace victimization is a complex issue that Comes in many shades and shapes at different levels. 'Victimization' is a traditional term with different

labels referring to this phenomenon which include bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011) and incivility (Cortina et al., 2001). Researchers have also acknowledged personal and political dimensions of victimization as a 'rational' Choice i.e. sabotaging the performance of colleagues to improve one's situation or getting rid of those who can be a burden or threatened (Salin, 2003).

### **Organizational Politics**

Organizational politics refers to informal behaviors and intentional acts for the protection or enhancement of one's self-interest (Amponsah & Annor, 2016). Ferris et al (1996) view organizational politics as informal, non-sanctioned, behaviors which may cause conflict and disharmony by putting employees or groups against one another, or organizational objectives and culture. Politics may create a poor social environment at the workplace entailing non-transparent decision making, injustice, and unfairness. Increased internal competition, globalization, restructuring, downsizing, reduced promotional opportunities, increased workloads, and reward systems make workplace prone to political tactics (Salin, 2003). Several job-related factors (workloads, job control, role ambiguity), team characteristics (social climate, support, interpersonal relationships), styles of leadership, organizational factors (structure and culture), career development (job security and growth opportunities), work interface (work and leisure time conflict) may trigger politics and victimizations at work (Johan et al., 2007; Trépanier et al., 2016). For example, a career-oriented employee may be victimized under political dispositions (Lane et al., 2018).

### **Organizational Politics and Workplace Victimization**

Organizational factors (i.e. support, ethical climate, justice, and trust) are important predictors of workplace deviance (Alias & Rasdi, 2015). The events of organizational politics occur within the social arena of the organization. Perceptions of unfairness and lack of moral consideration stemming from politics translate into a poor social environment at the workplace making it an environmental antecedent of victimization (Cortina et al., 2018). The relationship of a politically inclined environment with victimization can be based on different assumptions. Organizational politics, by triggering the stress process, make people prone to hostile thoughts and negative feelings which elicits aggression leading to conflicts and victimization (Balducci et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2018). Hectic and competitive work environment makes people use dysfunctional office politics to fulfill self-interests (Salin, 2003). Bullying stems from organizational politics (Salin, 2005), work-related environmental stressors (Johan et al., 2007; Balducci et al., 2012), and organizational culture (An & Kang, 2016). Braithwaite et al., (2008) examined the impact of organizational context (management strategies to manage shame and pride at work) on workplace victimization. Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

***Hypothesis 1:** Exposure to organizational politics increases the chances of someone being a target of workplace victimization.*

### **The Moderating Role of Hierarchical Status**

Work position and related legitimate power indicate the status that an employee holds within his hierarchy (French et al., 1959). It determines how high versus low positions will be treated how (Aquino, 2000); an experience of hostile interpersonal behaviors depends on who instigates and who receives it. In organizations, there is at least one subordinate group who receives a disproportionate share of negative liabilities e.g. social stigma, high level of punishments, and poor health facilities (Jia et al., 2018). The seniors usually victimize those lower in hierarchical status due to the higher level of the authority vested in their high-status positions (Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2018). Contrarily, low-status employees are not only deprived of benefit from the political decision-making style initiated by high ranked employees but they get victimized because of lower social status (Aquino et al., 1999).

Drory (1993) found supervisory positions moderate the relationship of job attitudes on perceptions of organizational politics. Aquino, Galperin, and Bennett (2004) predicted that people with low status reacted

defensively to self-invalidating acts leading to moderating the behavior of hierarchal position between interactional justices and deviance. Itzkovich (2014) predicted that incivility inflicted more damage When perpetrated by higher status employees by introducing psychological violations of the contract and intentions to withdraw. Uncivil acts were found to be higher in managers compared to incivility perpetrated by a peer. Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 2:** *The hierarchical status of the victim will moderate the association of 'organizational politics' with 'victimization' such that it is stronger for employees with lower positions at the workplace than those in higher positions.*

### Theoretical Model

The literature nattered above provides a basis for empirical testing of the following theoretical framework (Figure 1). Deviant place theory explains the proposed model in the way that employees in lower hierarchical positions with greater exposure to organizational political climate would be more likely to become targets of workplace victimization (Seigel, 2006).

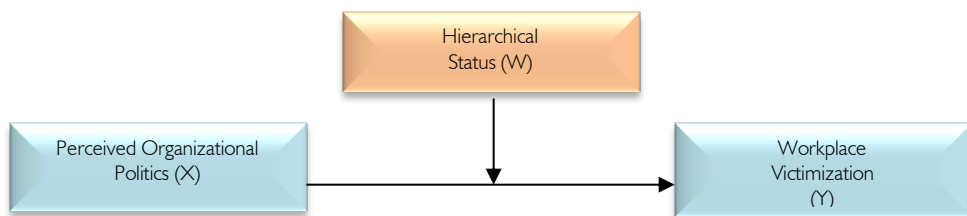


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

### Methodology

The present research followed the positivism research paradigm with deductive reasoning. A cross-sectional and correlational design has been used to test the proposed model. The potential causal influences are drawn from regression.

### Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 313 employees holding a different hierarchical position within teaching faculties of selected public and private universities in Lahore. The convenience sampling approach was adopted since it is considered suitable when the population is very large and there is no sampling frame. We randomly distributed 400 questionnaires to different individuals available at their work desk on the day of data collection. The 340 questionnaires were received back of which only 313 questionnaires were found properly filled (affective response rate 78%). The remaining questionnaires were discarded being not useable in this research due to large scale missing values.

### Measures: Reliability and Validity

Pre-validated measures were adopted to assess proposed variables; reliability coefficients established in this study are shown in Table 1. We assessed perceived organizational politics using 15 items (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997) and workplace victimization using 39 items on five-point Likert scales; 19 items indicating the prevalence of bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaer, 2009) and 20 items assessing incivility (Martin & Hine, 2005) at work. Employees' hierarchical status was determined using five categorical positions held within the teaching faculty of their university; lecturer (lower hierarchical status), Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor, and Dean/Chairman of Faculty (higher hierarchical status).

**Table 1.** Reliability and validity of measures

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Organizational politics	15	.792
Workplace victimization	39	.852

Convergent validity was determined using confirmatory factor analysis. The significant item loadings of above .700 ( $p < .001$ ), total variance explained above .500, and Alpha coefficient exceeding 0.700 for organizational politics and workplace victimization (bullying and incivility) indicated good convergent validity (Koivisto & Hamari, 2014). The square root of AVE for all variables greater than their correlation with other variables indicated better discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010; Thatcher et al., 2018).

## Results

### Sample

The sample profile ( $n=313$ ) was computed along with gender, age, marital status, education, the status of positions held by the respondents. It represented males (87%), age between 21–45 years (73%), and married (83%). Participants indicated to be highly educated; bachelor degree (24%), master's degree (56%), MS/M.Phil. degree (6%), and doctoral degree (2%). They represented status along with different hierarchical positions; lecturers (53%), Assistant Professors (18%), Associate Professors (17%), professors (8%), and Dean/Chairman of Faculty (4%). This indicates that a larger portion of the sample was male dominant, highly educated, and holding significant status varying along with academic positions within universities.

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to analyze means, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis to evaluate central tendency, normality, and stability. The mean values ranged from 1.91 (hierarchical status) to 3.168 (workplace victimization) with standard deviation ranging from 1.163 to .399, respectively which showed a good level of the central tendency and normality of data in this study. The normal distribution of data was also indicated by frequencies and histograms generated for each variable.

### Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis using Bootstrapping was performed. Results indicated significant positive correlations ( $-.543 \leq r \leq .544$ ,  $p < .01$ ) among proposed variables (Table 2). Organizational politics indicated a significant positive relationship with workplace victimization (.544). The hierarchical status showed significant negative relationships with workplace victimization (-.883) and organizational politics (-.543).

**Table 2.** Correlational outcomes ( $n=313$ )

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3
1. Organizational politics	15	3.121	.399	1		
2. Workplace victimization	39	3.168	.406	.544**	1	
3. Hierarchical status	5	1.910	1.163	-.543**	-.883**	1

<sup>a</sup> \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Testing Assumptions of Regression Analysis

Regression analysis aims to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationship among various variables in a given regression model assuming that change in the outcome variable depends on one or more

Independent variables. Regression results are considered reliable if data satisfy at least five key assumptions like independence of observations, no multicollinearity, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity (Hoffmann, 2010). The violations of such assumptions are considered to be problematic which increases probability errors and misrepresents the relationship among variables (Osborne & Waters, 2002). Independence was evaluated using the Durbin-Watson test ( $0 \leq d \leq 4$ ); no autocorrelation was observed. Normal P-P plots of standardized residuals indicated the linearity of data used. The values of skewness and kurtosis, as well as histograms and normal P-P plots for all models, satisfied the normality assumption. Multicollinearity was not indicated; the value of Tolerance  $> .2$ , VIF  $< 4$ , and Condition Index  $< 30$  were acceptable in all models. A Scatter plot of standardized residuals (Y-axis) and standardized predicted values of regression (X-axis) was examined which revealed that the distribution of residuals was symmetrical around zero which satisfied homoscedasticity.

### Effect of Organizational Politics on Workplace Victimization

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the association of organizational politics (OP) and workplace victimization (WV). The assumptions of this regression model; independence, linearity, normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were found satisfied. Results presented in Table 3 showed that organizational politics explained 31% variance in workplace victimizations ( $R^2 = .307$ ,  $F(1, 311) = 137.636$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model also predicted a 56% incremental change in workplace victimization through an additional one-unit change in organizational politics ( $b = .564$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, we accepted *hypotheses 1*. This relationship is represented by Equation 1.

**Table 3.** Regression model for organizational politics and workplace victimization

Model	Predictors	R-Square Change ( $\Delta R^2$ )	Unstandardized Coefficients			t
			B	Std. Error	$\beta$	
Workplace victimization	(Constant)		1.408*	.151		9.316**
	Organizational politics	.307**	.564**	.048	.554**	11.732**

s:  $R = .554$ ,  $R^2 = .307$ , Adj.  $R^2 = .305$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .307$ ,  $F(1, 311) = 137.636$ ,  $p < .05$   
 orkplace victimization, OP = Organizational politics

**Equation 1:** Workplace victimization = 1.408 + .564 (Organizational politics) + e

### Moderating Effect of Hierarchical Status

Moderation analysis was performed using Hayes's (2017) PROCESS Model 1 for SPSS. The workplace victimization (WV) was entered as dependent variable (Y), organizational politics (OP) as an independent variable (X), and hierarchical status (HS) as moderating variable (M) in the model. The option to mean center for products was selected to create an interaction term (OP $\times$ HS) in the model. The results (Table 4) explained about 53% variance ( $R^2 = .796$ ,  $F(3, 309) = 402.100$ ,  $p < .000$ ) in workplace victimization through a significant contribution of OP ( $b = .069$ ,  $p < .037$ ), HS ( $b = -.313$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a suppression effect of interaction (OP $\times$ HS) term ( $b = -.095$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 4.** Regression model for the moderating effect of HS on OP  $\rightarrow$  WV (n=313)

Moderation Model DV <sup>a</sup>	Predictors	Effect	Std. Error	t	95% CI		p
					LL	UL	
WV	(Constant)	3.143**	.013	250.243**	3.119**	3.168**	.000

HS	-.313**	.013	24.399**	-.339**	-.288**	.000
OP	.069*	.033	2.089*	.004*	.134*	.037
Interaction (OP×HS) <sup>b</sup>	-.095**	.028	-3.429**	-.150**	-.041**	.001

Conditional effect(s) of X on Y at values of the moderator:

HS	Effect	SE	t			
-.907	.155	.034	4.547	.000	.088	.223
.000	.069	.033	2.089	.037	.134	.134
1.163	-.042	.053	-.783	.434	.063	.063

Significant at \*p<.05 and \*\*p<.01 (1-tailed), CI=Confidence Interval using 1000 bootstrap samples.

a. Dependent variable (DV), b. Moderating variable: Hierarchical status (HS), where; X=Organizational politics (OP), Y=Workplace victimization (WV)  
SE=Standard Error, LL=Lower Level, UL=Upper Level

Model Summary:

=.892, R<sup>2</sup> = .796, MSE = .034, F (3, 309) = 402.100, p<.05

**Equation 2:**  $WV = 3.143 - .313(HS) + .069(OP) - .095(OP \times HS) + e$

The conditional effects of organizational politics on workplace victimization were significant at low (.155), medium (.069), and high (-.042) values of the moderator ( $\pm 1$  SD). The interaction plot (Figure 2) of the moderating model indicated that workplace victimization increased with a decreasing level of employees' hierarchical status and increased perception of organizational politics within the organization. Accordingly, we accepted the hypothesis 2. The statistical relationship is represented by Equation 2 and Figure 2.

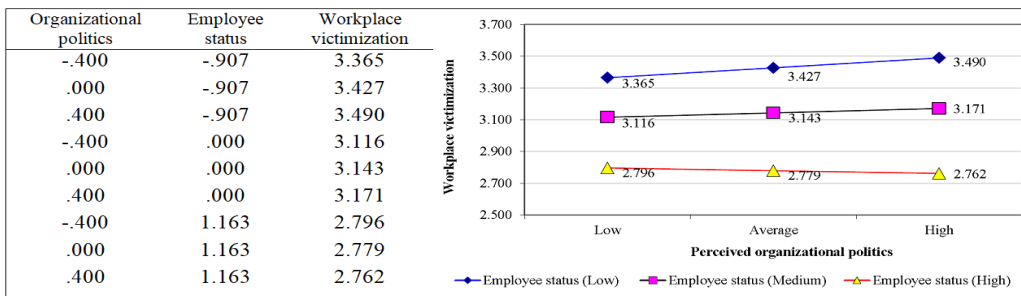


Figure 2. Moderating effect of hierarchical status

### Discussion

The first research question regarding the nature of the relationship between organizational politics and workplace victimization has been addressed by finding empirical support to accept the hypothesis 1. Organizational politics significantly contribute towards workplace victimization explaining 31% variance. Organizational politics has emerged to be a stronger associate of workplace victimization. It is a social process with both functional and dysfunctional sides to it. In its functional roles, organizational politics can allow a certain extent of flexibility, which other systems don't. However, it becomes dysfunctional when Organizational interests collide with the self-interest of employees. Victimization (bullying) seem to thrive in a hectic and competitive work environment where political tactics are more frequent as employees try to sabotage the performance of colleagues to get an improved position (Salin, 2003). Ineffective leadership

and certain reward systems possibly increase the employee's concern to eliminate people who are considered as rivals or burdens leading to dysfunctional political behaviors and consequently to victimization (Salin, 2005). Johan et al. (2007) also found support for this hypothesis saying a dysfunctional work environment provides fertile ground for victimization to work and grow. Hence, victimization prevails, particularly, in stressful work situations (Hourani et al., 2018; Lambert et al., 2018).

The second research question regarding the moderating effect of hierarchical status on the relationship between organizational politics and workplace victimization has been addressed by finding empirical support to accept hypothesis 2. Results supported that interactive effective hierarchical status and organizational politics significantly contributed towards workplace victimization explaining 79.6% variance. This indicated that hierarchical status moderates the politics-victimization relationship in a way that employees at higher positions in the hierarchy will be less victimized initiated by organizational politics whereas those in lower positions will be more prone to workplace victimization. Victim status provides a buffer against workplace victimization to higher status employees than lower-status ones. These results are also supported by some earlier studies that process of organization politics, which involves both high vs. lower status employees who involve in a struggle for personal advantages, initiate victimization which will be detrimental to some than others. Aquino (2000) explained that employee position in the organizational hierarchy is a strong buffer against intimidating acts. The results also imply that employees who lack authority to influence become victims of political games instead of benefiting from them. However, higher status employees who have legitimate power own the right for some sort of social deference and compliance. They are in a better position to not only initiate and handle political behaviors and victimization but also benefit from them (Aquino et al., 2001; Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2018).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Perceived organizational politics is a situational and environmental antecedent of workplace victimizations. Employees; hierarchical position moderates the relationship between organizational politics and victimization in a way that exposure to political climate with a lower level of the hierarchical position may induce higher levels of victimization as compared to those holding higher positions in the hierarchy. Power constraints associated with lower status employees cause them deprive of positive treatments. Overall, findings suggest that politics at work should be discouraged to prevent victimization since it has negative repercussions for all stakeholders including individual employees, groups, organizations, and the community at large. This calls universities to develop policies for the friendly and convenient workplace for lower status employees as well as reduce power disparities.

In the organizational quest to increase the social and emotional wellness of employees (Qaisar, Mariam, & Ahmad, 2018) and to mitigate workplace victimization, the pivotal focus should be on functional and stress-free environmental factors. Management needs to be aware that victimization can also occur in a highly competitive work environment where an employee can pursue personal interest at the expense of institutional interest. Therefore, while encouraging competition in institutions to get maximum results, management should be aware of a possible increase in politically inclined behaviors. This suggests a need for the management to have a policy on victimization and take preventive measures.

From human resource management perspectives, findings suggest selecting persons who are less likely to engage in politics and victimization at work. Certain personality type i.e. big five personality traits and dark vs light triad personalities may be considered in selection, training, and development programs. This perspective may be the subject of future research.

Moreover, the research has advantages for students in the long run. Teachers are builders of nations. If they are not having a healthy space to work, this problem will be transferred to students and ultimately will be Reflected through their results. The research implies that for the students and higher education performs well, teachers need to work well.



## **Limitations and Future Research**

We focused on the victim's perspective without accounting for the perspective of perpetrators and observers of the same victimizing situation. Further, research can benefit from a dyadic approach involving both the victim and the perpetrator. This enables the study to gain a better understanding of the conditional impact of organizational politics on victimization at different values of hierarchical status. This research has drawn a sample from teaching faculties of universities located in Lahore only. This limits the generalizability of findings in all universities and other organizations which may have different organizational cultures being located in different social setups. Future studies may involve a larger sample including administrative employees and lower-level subordinate staff from universities across Pakistan. The mixed-method or qualitative methods would also provide more nuanced insights into factors that stimulate political climate and workplace victimization. Due to the current global transformations of higher education, a better understanding of how different systems affect employee workplace experiences will be highly relevant. Future research can also be widened to other groups of employees, like salespeople and soldiers to use findings in the development of guidelines for victimization reduction in different professions and contexts. Lastly, we examined the moderating role of hierarchical status using only one dimension of power e.g. legitimate power. Further, research may examine other forms of power i.e. coercive power, expert power, referent power, and reward power to account for their potential buffering effect on the organizational politics-victimization relationship.

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