SECONDARY-SCHOOL STUDENTS' INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTOURISM EXPERIENCES: EFFECTS ON WORLDVIEWS, BEHAVIOURS, AND ASPIRATIONS

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Abstract: *In this case study, we document the experiences and perspectives of six young women who participated in two or more voluntourism projects while in secondary school. Participants completed individual interviews where they discussed the impact of their voluntourism experiences on their worldviews, behaviours, and aspirations. Voluntourism appeared to foster participants' long-term commitment to social justice and equity issues at global and local levels, with some participants expressing affiliated career ambitions. While participants reported enjoying being part of a community of like-minded individuals, they also discussed tensions, transitional difficulties and frustrations associated with their voluntourism experiences. To this end, we conclude by providing recommendations to prepare teachers for supporting youth's deconstruction, reflection, and meaning-making processes.*

Key words: secondary school students, voluntourism, beliefs, agency, critical questioning

Introduction

Preparing twenty-first century students to live in a global village is complex (Pike & Selby, 2000). It is imperative to prepare students for the ambiguity and uncertainty of our complex twenty-first century, "because ours is a world in which connections and consequences reach across borders and leap oceans" (Bennett, Cornwell, Al-Lail, & Schenck, 2012, p. 34). International volunteer abroad programs provide one vehicle for fostering youths' global understandings (Garcia & Longo, 2013; Norden, Avery, & Anderberg, 2012). However, supporting students' abilities to make meaning of their international experiences is requisite to maximizing the potential of these experiences (Norden et al.). Questions therefore arise about educators' roles in guiding and facilitating these discussions and their preparation to do so during teacher education programs.

Over the past decade, there has been signficant increase in students' interest in volunteer abroad programmes (Dykhuis, 2010; Jefferess, 2012; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). International volunteer abroad programmes hold the potential to transform youth by awakening new understandings of themselves, others, and their world (Crabtree, 2008; Dykhuis, 2010). Short-term volunteer abroad programmes, known as *voluntourism*, offer participants, who are predominately middle-class students, the opportunity to travel to developing countries where they engage in community service projects (Crabtree, 2008; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). Even participation in a single short-term voluntourism experience holds the potential to enhance secondary-school students' personal growth, social awareness, and/or social relationships (Brown, 2005; Dykhuis, 2010; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013). However, little, if any, research has explored the effects of participating in multiple short-term voluntourist trips while in secondary school. This study addressed this void in the literature.

In this paper, we begin by providing an overview of literature related to volunteer abroad programmes. This is followed by our methodology and findings. We outline the benefits participants derived from voluntourism including engagement, agency, and resituating of selves. We conclude with specific recommendations for teacher educators about how to prepare teachers to become engaged in critical dialogues with youth in order to support students' abilities to reflect critically on their experiences and the social-historical context of the areas where they volunteer.

Voluntourism

There are a wide variety of programs for students interested in volunteering abroad. The term voluntourism is used to describe volunteer abroad trips that are under one month (Tiessen & Kumar, 2013), with study abroad and international service denoting ventures of one to six months or longer. Voluntourism, like study abroad programs, are often intended to benefit participants primarily; whereas, service learning trips are intended to provide reciprocal benefits to communities and participants (Crabtree, 2008).

International volunteer abroad experiences have the potential to enhance global understandings (Garcia & Longo, 2013; Grierson & Denton, 2013), with many organizations offering youth the opportunity to participate in programs that combine educational tourism with community service. Research has documented that a single voluntourism experience can enhance secondary-school participants' personal growth, social awareness, and/or social relationships in general (Brown, 2005; Dykhuis, 2010; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013).

Voluntourism, however, is not without its critics. Through a meta-analysis of the volunteer abroad literature, Sherraden, Lough, and McBride (2008) qualified that many, if not most, participants are young, affluent, and white, with these demographic characteristics affecting their perceptual lenses and experiential outcomes. Simpson (2004) cautioned that rather than enhance global understandings, participation in these programs can perpetuate stereotypes by reinforcing simplistic boundaries where commonalities amongst people are ignored and differences between "us and them" are emphasized. Poverty becomes the definer of difference rather than a shared experience caused by systematic oppression and marginalization. Collectively, such views may lead participants to focus on luck as a rational for their position in the world.

Additionally, Pluim and Jorgenson (2012) cautioned that voluntourist programs have the potential to perpetuate the neo-colonial practices they seek to overcome. They asserted that such programs may reinforce relations of superiority/inferiority, with the youth who come to "help" or "save" the less fortunate "others" often unaware of this positioning, or the underlying ethical issues of colonialism and oppression. Moreover, they argued that "behind benevolent appropriation such as 'helping' is often a failure to critically reflect on one's position relative to the rest of the world" (p. 31).

Although Dykhuis (2010) documented that voluntourism was beneficial to secondary-students' personal growth, she concurs that most participants are poorly equipped to address global inequities and awareness of stereotypes. Dykhuis adds voice to others (Pluim & Jorgenson, 2012; Simpson, 2004) that participants need to be engaged in social justice pedagogy that emphasizes commonalities and assists students in understanding the conditions that create and perpetuate injustice and inequality in the host country with attention to sterotyping, relativism, and culturally sensitive exploration of ethical dilemmas.

Without structured opportunities to reflect critically on their experiences, youth who volunteer abroad may lack the resources to deconstruct ethical dilemmas that they encounter, such as the causes and consequences of poverty, moral codes, and/or personal values in the host culture (Epprecht, 2004; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). While voluntourism participants may recognize social problems and ethical dilemmas, without guided critical reflection they are unlikely to search for a higher level of understanding about why such problems exist and how they originated (Epprecht, 2004; Monard-Weissman, 2003).

Tiessen and Kumar (2013) recommended that volunteer preparation and debriefing programs focus on connectedness, complexity, and critical literacy. Additionally, they argued that without structured preparation and reflective debriefing, youth returning from voluntourism trips may become angry with, or feel alienated from, their peers or family members who did not share these experiences. They echoed Epprecht's (2004) assertion that without appropriate deconstruction and support, the saliency and meaning of participants' experiences may dimish over time.

Canadian youths' increased interest in voluntourism can be attributed in part to the *Me to We* organization (Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). Established by humanitarians Marc and Craig Kielburger, *Me to We* is a Canadian business described as a "social enterprise" (Jefferess, 2012). *Me to We* markets motivational speakers and volunteer trips to developing countries, where the affiliated non-profit organization *Free the Children* is engaged in international development work (Jefferess). Additionally, *Me to We* hosts annual *We Days* for tens of thousands of Canadian, American, and British students that feature humanitarian celebrities and seek to empower youth to be agents of positive social change. With these events broadcasted simultaneously into many schools, *Me to We* and their affiliated "schools-in-action" clubs are becoming mainstays of school systems (Jefferess).

Me to We provides sustainable funding to *Free the Children* by donating half of their profits to this non-profit organization (Jefferess, 2012). These funds support the international development projects undertaken by *Free the Children* that focus on enhancing education, health care, water and sanitation, agriculture, and alternative income opportunities of designated villages in developing countries (Kielburger, 2009). As a function of the relationship with *Free The Children*, *Me to We* voluntourism participants engage in international development projects.

Despite the popularity of voluntourism (Jefferess, 2012; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013), there is relatively little research investigating how participation in multiple voluntourism experiences affects the worldviews and behaviour of youth. In this study, we explored the experiences and meaning-making processes of students who participated in multiple *Me to We* voluntourism trips while in secondary school. The research questions addressed were

1. How do voluntourism experiences influence participants' worldviews, behaviours, and aspirations?
2. How do participants make meaning of their voluntourism experiences?

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies are appropriate when researchers wish to gain a deep understanding of individuals' experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2002). In this study we sought to understand the phenomenon of voluntourism as experienced and shared across participants. We adopted a basic interpretative case study methodology

where participants were bound by shared international experiences facilitated by the same host organization.

Me to We Voluntourism

All participants engaged in *Me to We* voluntourism and affiliated *Free the Children* international development projects (see *www.metowe.com/living-me-to-we/why-me-to-we-products-are-different/why-trips/*). Their travels ranged from 10 days (winter break) to 21 days (summer). Pre-trip preparation focused primarily on logistics (e.g., insurance, packing lists). While away, participants interacted with local community members as coordinated by *Me to We* and were involved in ongoing initiatives such as school building. Participants stayed in enclosed camps built for youth with all excursions outside of the camp to designate locations under the supervision of Canadian *Me to We* youth facilitators. As part of their programs, participants engaged in activities intended to familiarize them with the daily realities of the host community. For instance, while in Kenya participants engaged in a water walk where they hiked to a local river situated a few kilometers from their camp to fill and return with large canteens of water. This activity was intended to illustrate one of the daily responsibilities of women in the community, promote considerations of complexities associated with access to education and health care, and underscore the importance of *Free the Children's* water well initiatives.

Participants

Participants were six Canadian adolescent females (pseudonyms Megan, Elizabeth, Jude, Ariana, Rose, and Sarah). Each had completed two or three voluntourism trips while in secondary school. Participants described themselves as belonging to "middle class" families living in "hick town" or "cookie cutter" neighbourhoods with little ethnic and/or cultural diversity. Participants learned about voluntourism through information sessions, teacher volunteers and/or chaperons, or other youth at their schools. The cost of each *Me to We* trip ranged from $3000 to $5000. Rose financed her own travel. Megan, Elizabeth, and Jude covered their travel costs through a combination of personal contributions, fundraising, and parental support. The remaining two participants' parents fully funded their travels.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants completed two semi-structured interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length that were conducted by a graduate student trained in qualitative interview techniques. Feedback from participants indicated they felt at ease with the research assistant and perceived her as a peer versus parent or teacher – criterion identified as desirable in context of deconstructing youth's international experiences (O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013). Interviews were open-ended, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were read and analyzed first as single cases (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and then reread for the purposes of cross-case analysis and comparative analyses (Merriam, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of participants' post-travel reflections, meaning making processes, and resulting behaviours documented that they perceived they benefited from their voluntourism experiences. Unfortunately, participants also demonstrated some beliefs consistent with the perpetuation of global stereotypes and emphasis of "us and them" differences. More positively, some participants demonstrated evidence of emerging criticality. We contextualized these findings in the literature, emphasizing the importance of structured preparation and debriefing.

Engagement and Leadership

Consistent with the voluntourism literature, these young women reported their travels to be "life changing" and "eye opening" (Brown, 2005; Dykhuis, 2010; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013). They expressed increased efficacy beliefs about their abilities to enact change and contribute to the betterment of international communities.

My top interest is social justice and helping people in third world countries to have a better life. (Rose)

Me and my friends have goals to change the world… it's going to happen… it's a slow process... but we are going for the little acts in total to make a big difference. (Jude)

Five participants intended to integrate international service into their postsecondary studies, in some cases despite parental concerns about the hardships associated with such a career choice. Rose intended to address social justice issues nationally, "I thought I would kind of help and change things here as opposed to going across the world".

Participants believed that they benefited personally from their experiences with two participants qualifying their gains as greater than those of the host communities, "I think I benefited way more than anyone else there which is unfortunate" (Megan), "What we did for them could never amount to what I got from them" (Sara). Several participants contextualized their contributions as part of ongoing, community-driven, sustainable initiatives.

I learned that I could help and make a difference even if it's a small difference. (Ariana)

We're doing something for them and that will have an impact…it's something that they desired, asked for, and it's significant. (Elizabeth)

I do think in five years down the road it will still be giving back to the community. (Rose)

They also attributed their voluntourism as motivational in terms of continued engagement with social justice issues, "I became significantly more involved" (Sara). Participants independently formed connections between their secondary school courses and social justice issues. They inquired about global issues during class and selected social justice related topics for assignments. Megan and Jude indicated that discussions with teachers familiar with voluntourism were especially valued.

He is by far the most like inspirational teacher I've ever had in my life. (Jude)

We would have discussions with our teacher even long after class was over… me and him and my friend would get really into talking about some international, like some world issue, or some theory or something. We just would not stop talking. (Megan)

Participants also presented formally and informally about their voluntourism experiences. They assumed leadership roles as part of *Me to We* schools-in-action programs where they encouraged peer participation in a number of social-justice initiatives and voluntourism.

We have a social justice club and we work with the non-profit organization Free the Children and I'm the President of that group and we do fundraisers and awareness, raise funds on health, water, alternative income, and education for communities in third world countries. (Rose)

I brought two people on this trip [2ⁿᵈ voluntourism] with me…not only do I want to make an impact with people in these countries but I want to help Canadians make the impact as well. (Elizabeth)

We shared a lot, we spoke about our experiences at the Free the Children club meetings …we got to talk to other people at our school… everyone was eager to share. (Megan)

All participants expressed strong intentions to participate in additional voluntourism. The interconnected web of *Me to We* and *Free the Children* youth oriented programs and experiences appeared to foster these participants' sustained commitment to social justice, affirming the assertion that the match between participants and the host organization affects participants' outcomes (Sherraden et al., 2008).

Positionality, Behaviourism, and Advocacy

Similar to other youth (Dykius, 2010; Simpson, 2004), participants returned with increased appreciation for being Canadian and receiving national health care and education, "Once I came back I was more focused and saw how privileged we were to live in Canada" (Rose). While they described their good fortune as circumstantial, some also acknowledged that poverty and marginalization existed in Canada, "there are places like that in Canada" (Jude), "We forget that so much is actually happening here in Canada…we kind of sweep it under the rug or we don't always see" (Rose).

Like other youth (Pluim & Jorgenson, 2012), participants appeared to be inspired by what they perceived as a universal orientation towards "happiness" regardless of living conditions, "Seeing how happy they were there with how little there was there" (Sara).

You got to that community and you'd watch these kids and they'd be dancing and smiling and holding hands and laughing…it is the happiest country I've ever seen [Kenya]. And I used to think it was sad or everyone wanted something more, but they don't. The parents just want their kids to be able to learn and to be able to have clean water. (Jude)

Over time, some participants began to question their observations. For instance, Rose and Sarah spoke about the complexities of poverty. Megan and Adriana's happy-but-poor beliefs were challenged upon returning home when they queried the physical appearance of children they encountered and were informed that they were likely malnourished.

Two of the students had passed out due to malnourishment and dehydration….we had to go run and bring juice boxes to and granola bars just so they could stay conscious enough to last the five hour drive to the nearest medical centre, which is insane…it's just ridiculous that they have to go so far and the conditions are so serious. It was a real shock…this is real. These are issues that are legitimately happening. (Rose)

I remember we would be playing with the kids and there were like little circles above their teeth that were darker in colour and their hair was like a little bit red. I remember asking, "Oh what are those things on their teeth? Is it from lack of brushing teeth? What is it?" And he [physician] said, "it's actually from malnutrition"…I was just really shocked because what I thought that was like a very simple thing like brushing teeth but it was actually due to something much deeper. (Megan)

Participants explained that their voluntourism experiences motivated them to change their daily behaviours, "seeing it,

made me do something instead of just reading about it" (Elizabeth). They become resource aware and engaged in conservation.

We found ourselves very water conscious and we'd turn off the light…if we saw someone else do it [not conserve] we would call them out on it…before we would probably just let it go or we wouldn't even notice. (Rose)

I still take staggered showers…. I don't understand the concept of leaving the water on the whole time I just don't get it. There are definitely things like that which I still do. (Sara)

Participants also reported increased willingness to speak against global stereotypes and critique media representations.

How the media portrays…India, like it's such a dirty place, it smells so bad, like the people are disgusting, they're rude. There are so many negative assumptions about the culture. I'm just like, "No that's not it at all. You've got it totally wrong." There are these assumptions and all these stereotypes. (Rose)

One of my friends [said]…"Go to China because China is developing to be something. If you build a school you will actually help someone become something. Africa is Africa. It's never going to change"… So I am saying, "that's not necessarily true... you just have to give people the opportunity to prove themselves". (Elizabeth)

When I thought of Africa I just thought of like the sad kids you see on TV and poverty and it's [personal belief] changed so drastically…the media like doesn't portray anything right… It's crazy. (Jude)

In part, participants' reflections and behaviours are consistent with those described by Dykhuis (2010) where youth accepted their global position as birth-related happenstance with little thought to underling causations and factors that maintain social inequities. These participants differed however in their willingness to engage in behavioural changes and challenge stereotypes.

Reflecting and Transitioning

Participants acknowledged the importance of reflection for meaning making, explaining that they could only engage in such processes after returning home.

It wasn't until I got home and I saw the clean water did it click and it wasn't until I went to the grocery store and I saw the bananas did that click... that was my "ah ha" moment. (Elizabeth)

You had so many of these weird thoughts that were out of place and then you just had to piece them together and it worked when you were home, but I couldn't have had that realization when staying there because you're still blind when you're there. (Jude)

Consistent with Tiessen and Kumar's (2013) assertion, many participants felt "out of step" with family and peers when they returned home, with this tension greatest following their first voluntourism trip. Participants expressed being "critical", "angry", and "judgmental" of those who appeared wasteful of resources, materialistic, and/or unconcerned about social justice issues, "coming back to Canada and seeing how people who are well off here don't even care…got me angry" (Ariana). Rose and Sara explained that others could not be expected to understand poverty and inequality without exposure to critical events.

You come back and you are sort of judgmental, it's just because they haven't

had the same experiences you have and you've seen different things. [You think] "how can you be wasting that food and water? People don't have that". (Sara)

Some participants believed their family and peers were incapable of understanding their experiences, "it was difficult because none of my friends can relate to a trip like that … your parents aren't there" (Elizabeth). Instead they gained support from each other and other youth they met via voluntourism.

She [voluntourist friend] said, "I hate my room and I hate my pillow and I don't like my TV and I don't like the clothes in my closet." ... "She gets it. She gets it."... She came home and said, "I don't know what to do" and was like, "It's okay. I didn't either." (Jude)

They described these relationships as meaningful ones that allowed them to connect with like-minded peers, "I became friends with them all. They were really awesome, and it was a good group" (Megan), "I just try to align myself with people who can think on a global scale" (Elizabeth). These relationships also provided a network to exchange information and coordinate social justice activities.

We'll message each other and be like, "Read this article, read this article". (Jude)

My friends who have similar interests in social justice, since we aren't in the same school, community, or even the same province, we always talk about how our social justice clubs can help each other …we talk about what we can do together (Rose)

Consistent with Brown's (2005) assertion, participants valued their relationships with other voluntourism participants, attributing engaging in subsequent trips, in part to these relationships.

Emerging Criticality

These participants demonstrated differing levels of criticality with respect to their volunteerism. Jude and Ariana, the youngest participants appeared the least critical. Ariana continually referred to her voluntourism as "mission trips". Jude used the term "charities" throughout her interviews and seemed "star struck" by opportunities to travel with nationally known facilitators.

I remember in grade six I read an article on Craig Kielburger and then you know I signed up for this trip and I watched the documentary and I was like oh my gosh, like you started this whole thing….My favourite public speaker right now is Spencer West and I was blessed enough to have him as a facilitator. (Jude)

This adds credibility to the assertion that *Me to We* motivational speakers are akin to celebrities who gain "rock star" status amongst youth (Jefferess, 2012).

Rose demonstrated some emerging criticality, recognizing her minimal community interactions.

We weren't able to communicate, we weren't able to connect with the children…it was more of hearing stories from Free the Children representatives about community members that is how we got to know the community a bit. (Rose)

Megan, the oldest participant who was completing first year postsecondary studies, appeared most critical. Like Rose, she recognized her limited involvement with the host communities and questioned the value of her contributions.

I learned a lot this year…[I question] their role as an organization and our role as volunteers going overseas... It's difficult for them [host community] to have a strong foundation and trust with

people…and then have those people leave all the time… different ways I'm able to use my skills and talents…because I'm not a builder…Like why can't someone from the host country facilitate the trips? I mean they know the country better than somebody who comes from Canada...Free the Children definitely has things that we get to see and we obviously don't get to see the whole picture because we're not living with the family…. I mean it's a little bit idolizing…I was not getting the whole picture. (Megan)

Megan was registered for a university sponsored service-learning experience and was eager to interact with her host family, "I'm going to be having the opportunity to live with a host family and work with a Ghanaian organization". Despite her concerns, Megan believed that voluntourism "inspires a lot of people to starting thinking about development, which is really great".

Concluding Thoughts

We believe that the participants in this study are unique in terms of their engagement in multiple voluntourism ventures, as well as their enhanced understandings of their experiences relative to other youth who elect to participate in voluntourism. Consistent with researchers' assertions (Crabtree, 2008; Dykhuis, 2010; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013), participants' voluntourism experiences appeared to promote personal growth, social awareness, and global understandings. Specifically, these young women demonstrated increased interest in international issues as well as emerging understandings of their positions of privilege. They appeared sincere in their commitments to participate in positive global change, demonstrated criticality of media representations, and at times, challenged the misconceptions of their peers. They reported behavioural changes as a function of their experiences and

integrated their commitment to pursue social justice issues as part of their studies.

Nonetheless, these participants were candid about their post-travel transitional difficulties and recognized the importance of reflection for meaning making. Their struggles underscore the call of other researchers for in-depth pre- and post-voluntourism discussions (Epprecht, 2004; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). We believe that educators are well positioned to facilitate such deliberations, and hold some responsibility to do so whether as part of formal or informal conversations. However, we also acknowledge that not all educators possess extensive understandings about colonialism, privilege, systematic oppression, and marginalization as related to the multiple locations where students may participate in voluntourism activities. Furthermore, we recognize that discussions that problematize voluntourism only (Jefferess, 2012) may negate or diminish the benefits associated with this activity and discourage students from continued involvement. Therefore, we suggest that teacher educators prepare future teachers to engage in balanced critical questioning techniques to support students' meaning making of their voluntourism experiences.

Critical literacy pedagogy is consistent with the objectives of global citizenship in that it is intended to promote individuals' abilities to contemplate implicit as well as explicit messages associated across multiple text mediums (spoken, written, visual, digital) and experiences (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Locke & Cleary, 2011; Wood, Soares & Watson, 2006). As part of critical reflection, students are encouraged to question the everyday, overt and covert power relations, and multiple realities and alternative positions (Lewison & Leland, 2002). The use of critical question prompts is one readily accessible technique that teacher educators can use to prepare future teachers to facilitate thoughtful discussion

and reflection. We encourage educators to use generic prompts such as those developed by Bean and Moni (2003) and McLaughlin and DeVoodg (2004, 2011) when reviewing voluntourism materials and activities.

Who is behind the construction of the text?
Whose view of the world is advocated?
What is the historical/cultural origin on the text?
What social function does the text serve?
What other positions might there be?
Who has voice in the text?
Who does not have voice in the text?
How might the text be rewritten to give voice to the silenced?

In order to establish a balanced-perspective and promote students' continued, yet informed engagement, we also suggest that teacher educators introduce future teachers to the use of prompts that focus on connectedness, self-awareness and continued learning as advocated by Tiessen and Kumar (2013). We believe that such prompts are especially important in assisting students in processing their voluntourism experiences.

Have I acquired new understandings and skills?
Have I changed as an individual?
Have I learned about myself as an individual, as a member of my community and as a global citizen?
What questions have remained? What new questions have emerged?
How might I seek out information to address my questions?
How can I transfer the knowledge and skills that I have acquired?

In the absence of skilled adults guiding and nurturing critical discussions, the participants in this study turned to each other for such support. While participants acknowledged the strength of ongoing relationships with others involved in voluntourism, there is little evidence that they gained critical insights or feedback from their peers. Instead, participants seemed to differ in terms of their emerging criticality, gaining insights over time, through varied experiences and with access to divergent sources of information.

We acknowledge that these participants represent only a subset of youth who engage in voluntourism. However, they do provide educators with critical insights about the potential of voluntourism and the meaning making processes of youth who engage in it. Fortunately, participants' post-travel disequilibrium did not overshadow their overall enthusiasm to take up social justice issues and engage in subsequent voluntourism. Indeed, these participants assumed leadership roles in their schools and actively promoted voluntourism. Presumably participation in structured briefing and debriefing sessions facilitated by educators who have been introduced to critical questioning techniques during their teacher education programs would provide such youth with greater confidence and abilities to assume these roles and interact with their peers in informed and critical manners.

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