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WORKLOAD AND BURNOUT AMONG MALAYSIAN PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS: THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT
Early childhood education is an important milestone in a child's development journey, serving as a foundation to their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth. This makes the role of early childhood educators extremely important, putting additional pressure on preschools to perform. Teaching, however, is a demanding profession, and many educators face severe emotional challenges due to job-related stress. This study investigates the relationship between workload, stress, and burnout among preschool teachers in Malaysia and examines the role of professional support. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 80 preschool teachers, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The questionnaire measured workload, teacher stress, burnout, and professional support. Data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS 4. The results indicated that workload significantly correlates with professional support, teacher burnout, and stress. Professional support significantly affects teacher stress but not burnout. Teacher burnout is positively associated with teacher stress. The study highlights the necessity of implementing comprehensive professional support systems to reduce teacher burnout and enhance job performance. The findings provide practical implications for educational policymakers to develop strategies for reducing stress and improving teacher well-being.
Keywords: Early childhood, Teacher stress, Teacher burnout, Professional support, Mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, education has always been focused on teaching students the 3 R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic along with core subjects such as language and social sciences (Alghazo et al., 2022). In the typical method, a teacher teaches a subject by continually requiring students to recite or repetition writing excercises, which detracts from the class's entertainment value. This paradigm is based on a teacher-led emphasis on rote learning, which demands students to memorise a large amount of knowledge to advance their education. At the end of the year, teachers assess students' knowledge using examinations and quizzes to measure their level of learning. On the other hand, contemporary curriculum writers recognise the essential nature of developing educational objectives and instructional strategies that sufficiently prepare students for college and future careers.

1.1 Problem Statement

Currently, there is a lot of pressure on preschools to perform better and do more. Curriculums are also expanding to add more subjects and activities. Research has shown that there is a correlation between underperformance and high teacher workload (Alzoubi et al., 2024; Eduwem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020). High job demands can lead to feelings of over strain and emotional exhaustion, which is burnout (Chakravorty & Singh, 2022). Students, teachers and schools are pushed towards activities, and professional development as well as adapting and changing to meet modern society. As a result, academic burnout could set in and student lose interest as well as focus in class. Teachers with high stress, and high burned out were also associated with the poorest performing students (Madigan et al., 2023).

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this research are:
RQ1: Is there a correlation between professional support, teacher burnout and teacher stress to workload?
RQ2: Is there a correlation between teacher stress and teacher burnout to professional support?
RQ3: Does demographic information (age, salary, years of experience and gender), workload, teacher stress and professional support predict teacher burnout?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout is a "syndrome of emotional weariness and cynicism that frequently emerges among individuals engaged in people-work" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It comprises of three dimensions which are (i) emotional exhaustion, (ii) depersonalization, and (iii) reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion reflects feelings of being overwhelmed and depleted of resources, while depersonalization involves cynicism and hostility toward those one serves. Reduced personal accomplishment is linked to diminished productivity and competence (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Freudenberger (Freudenberger, 1974) identified burnout as physical and mental exhaustion resulting from demanding professions, particularly in caregiving roles. Burnout manifests physically as headaches, fatigue, and sleep disturbances; behaviourally as irritability, inefficiency, and inflexibility; and psychologically as resistance to feedback and negativity toward organizational goals. Its consequences include reduced care quality, absenteeism, low morale, family strain, substance abuse, and high turnover rates (Freudenberger, 1975; Maslach et al., 2001, 2015). Unlike psychiatric disorders classified in the DSM, burnout emerged as a response to societal issues and lacks standardized interventions.

2.1 Teacher Burnout

Early research revealed that several problems, including poor student behaviour, apathy, absenteeism, and low achievement, contributed to the stress experienced by teachers (Friedman, 1995; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978) Teachers may experience stress due to a variety of issues at work, including administrative expectations, school violence, inadequate pay, packed classrooms, and social factors like feelings of isolation (Friedman & Farber, 1992; Piyakun & Salim, 2023). Maslach et al. (Maslach et al., 2001) claimed that although there may be an extensive range of potential causes and contributors, situational and individual factors impact levels of burnout. Situational elements include organizational rigidity, lack of internal rewards, and insufficient administrative support. Individual factors include demographic traits, personality, and professional experience. Research have indicated that high burnout levels are associated with low teacher self-efficacy, a lack of support, and rigid organizational structures (Anton & Van Ryzin, 2024)Teaching requires significant levels of mental, physical, and emotional resources. Teachers must manage lesson planning, student behavior, diverse learning needs, parental interactions, grading, and administrative demands. Unsurprisingly, many educators leave the profession due to burnout.

Teacher attrition rates are considerably higher than employees in other professions (Bauer et al., 2006) and that it is intrinsic to the teaching profession (Toma et al., 2022). In the United States, it was reported that teacher attrition rates are 50% within the first five years of employment (Pas et al., 2010; Schussler et al., 2016) and they have risen with time (Carroll & Foster, 2009). Research indicated that burnout is the leading cause of the increased rate of early retirement due to psychological diseases and symptoms (Bauer et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2012). Research highlights various predictors of burnout and attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Ruble et al., 2023). (Akbaba, 2014) and (Schulze-Hagenest et al., 2023) found that teachers reporting high job satisfaction experienced lower burnout levels. Factors contributing to job satisfaction included personal interests, alignment with skills, and a sense of meaning in the work. Conversely, burnout was linked to issues like poor administrative support, isolation, and classroom management challenges. School support, belonging, work-life balance, and professional identity were identified as key factors influencing early career teacher retention (Clandinin et al., 2015; Hulme & Wood, 2022). Teachers' professional identities (Hong, 2010), emotional regulation (Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015) , levels of professional knowledge (Dicke et al., 2015) and self-efficacy in teaching methodologies are other factors that have been studied as leading to burnout (de Neve et al., 2015). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011) conducted a recent study in Norway to examine teacher attrition, mainly looking at teacher work satisfaction and reasoning behind wanting to leave the teaching profession. Sentiments of belonging and teachers' physical and mental tiredness were at least somewhat responsible for mediating the relationship between school setting characteristics and job satisfaction among instructors.

Time constraints and classroom discipline issues were also significant determinants of job satisfaction. Unsurprisingly, motivation to leave the field was correlated with emotional weariness and job satisfaction. A supportive school culture that fosters the development and promotion of shared values and goals and lessens the time pressure on teachers is crucial to enhancing work satisfaction and feelings of belonging (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). While much research focuses on the negative aspects of burnout, Hakanen et al. (Hakanen et al., 2006) approached it from a positive psychological perspective, examining burnout as the opposite of work engagement. Their study highlighted that while many educators experience burnout, a substantial proportion remain engaged and resilient, suggesting the potential for interventions that promote motivation and career satisfaction

2.2 Teacher Stress

Teaching is a stressful career, and many teachers experience severe emotional suffering due to the job's stress (Madigan et al., 2023; Zagni et al., 2025). Negative stress could be damaging to one's health and performance (Asaloei et al., 2020). When instructors are overburdened and unable to cope, their relationships with students are likely to suffer, resulting in students' negative academic and behavioural results (Wentzel et al., 2010). Persistent stress can have a detrimental effect on a professional's health, resulting in burnout. According to the transactional model of stress, stress and burnout happens when an individual has a low opinion of their ability to meet their goals, such as when they are overloaded or overworked (Sapolsky, 2004). As a result, teacher burnout, stress, coping, and self-efficacy reinforce one another. Teacher burnout has been linked to withdrawal from the classroom and job

absenteeism and irritability and poor performance (Belcastro & Gold, 1983). Unsurprisingly, teacher stress also correlates with negative student behaviors, including disruptive behaviours such as defiance and bullying (Anton & Van Ryzin, 2024; Kokkinos, 2007).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping describes how stress occurs when there is an imbalance between demands needed and resources provided (Biggs et al., 2017). Through this model, we are also able to understand how coping strategies affect stress and people's long term health. According to the model, when the demand (stressor) exceeds what teachers are able to do or have (resource), this is when stress happens. In the teaching profession, stressors like excessive workloads and inadequate support can lead to burnout when resources are insufficient to meet demands. Addressing these challenges through systemic and individual-level strategies can reduce burnout and enhance teacher retention. Teacher burnout is a multifaceted issue with significant implications for educators, students, and educational institutions. While burnout is influenced by situational, individual, and organizational factors, promoting teacher self-efficacy, supportive school cultures, and effective coping mechanisms can mitigate its impact. The transactional model of stress and coping underscores the importance of balancing demands and resources to reduce stress and enhance teacher well-being.

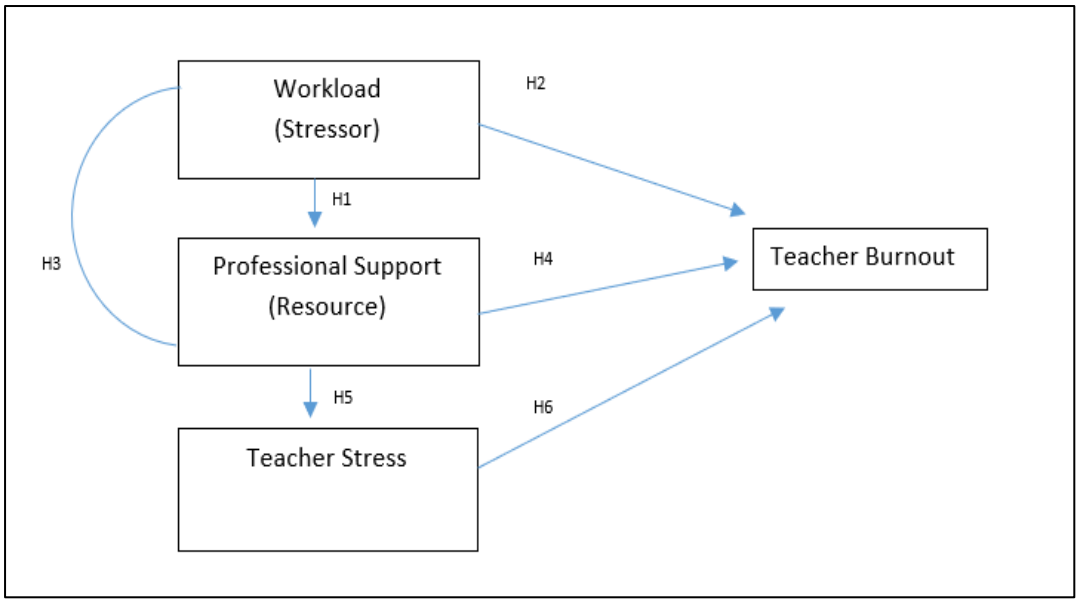

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used quantitative correlational design as the researcher wanted to analyze the relationship between variables without manipulating them. The unit of analysis for this research are preschool teachers. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to sample 80 preschool teachers within the state of Melaka, Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan and Pahang in Malaysia. Purposeful sampling was chosen because participants have the ability to yield relevant answers (Kamarudin & Hussain, 2019). Snowball was used so that the teachers could recommend other teachers into the research. The inclusionary criteria for participant would be that they have to be teachers teaching preschool. G Power software was used to calculate for the estimated sample size with a Power (1-β err prob) set at 0.80, and 3 predictors. The minimum sample size required for this study was 68 participants. However, 80 samples were successfully collected, exceeding the minimum estimate. This ensures the research has adequate statistical power to perform the analysis while minimizing the risk of Type I or Type II errors. Although the use of purposeful and snowball sampling limits the generalizability of the results, it enhances the study's transferability, allowing the theories generated to be applied in similar contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research used SPSS and SmartPLS 4 to analyze data. Before running the data through the softwares, the data collected were examined to confirm the absence of missing values, anomalies in the patterns, and outliers. The measurement model were analyzed through examining the relationships among the variables. The research investigated the internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity of each item in the instrument. The internal consistency reliability of was assessed using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficient, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was tested to determine the convergent validity of the instrument. The cross-loadings, Fornell-Larcker criterion, and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) were utilised to examine the discriminant validity of each item in the measure.

4.1 Demographic Profile

The demographic analysis found that majority of the daycare and preschool teachers who participated in this study were female (91.3%). Their ages ranged from below 25 years of age (6.3%), 26 - 35 years old (21.3%), 36 – 45 years old (43.8%), 46 – 55 years old (25%) and 3.8% were more than 56 years old. There were also a mixture in terms of their working experience teaching in daycare or preschool where 11.3% were less than 2 years, 8.8% were 2 – 5 years, 6.3% were 6 – 9 years, 13.8% were 10 – 13 years, 33.8% were 14 – 17 years, 3.8% were 18 – 21 years, 10% were 22 – 25 years, 10% were 26 – 29 years and 2.5 % were more than 30 years of working experience.

4.2 Measurement Constructs

Table 1 shows the summary of descriptive statistics on workload, professional support, teacher stress and teacher burnout. It can be seen that the means for all constructs were ranged from 2.62 to 3.64 on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Here, workload has the highest mean value among the factors. The standard deviation of all these constructs lies between 0.86 to 1.02. Besides, both the skewness (range of -0.437 to 0.336) and kurtosis (range of -0.528 to -0.770) of the constructs were well within the acceptable range, therefore the data set in this study is normally distributed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of measurement constructs

		Workload	Professional Support	Teacher Stress	Teacher Burnout
N	Valid	80	80	80	80
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.6396	2.7375	2.6232	2.7188
Std. Deviation		.85989	.85757	1.01862	.96056
Skewness		-.437	.206	.336	.180
Std. Error of Skewness		.269	.269	.269	.269
Kurtosis		-.528	-.628	-.572	-.770
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.532	.532	.532	.532

4.3 Measurement Model Assessment: Reliability and Validity

The measurement model was evaluated by computing the following metrics: (i) Cronbach's Alpha, (ii) Composite Reliability (CR), (iii) Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and (iv) discriminant validity of the reflective constructs. To ensure the usability of the data collection instrument, it must demonstrate adequate reliability and validity. These were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, rho_A, CR, and AVE. The validity test of outer loadings was conducted to ensure the validity of the items. Items with loadings below 0.4 were deleted, as they were deemed unusable. Out of 29 items in the questionnaire, 5 items were deleted. For the remaining items, all indicator loadings exceeded the required threshold of >0.7, as shown in Table 2, except for WL2, WL5, PS1, PS2, and TB4. The indicator loading values ranged from 0.545 to 0.889. Despite some indicators falling below the threshold, they were retained because the average variance extracted (AVE) for the work satisfaction component exceeded 0.5, indicating an acceptable level of convergent validity (Henseler et al., 2009; 2014). This demonstrates that all retained indicators are strongly associated with their respective constructs while showing weaker associations with other constructs. Reliability was confirmed, as all variables within each construct exceeded the threshold value of 0.7. Table 2 illustrates that Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.84 to 0.91, signifying high reliability. Similarly, CR values ranged from 0.88 to 0.93, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2014). Additionally, AVE values ranged from 0.55 to 0.67, surpassing the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.5. Thus, the current model demonstrates adequate construct reliability and validity, ensuring the robustness of the measurement model.

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
Workload	WL1 WL2 WL3 WL4 WL5 WL6	0.767 0.694 0.761 0.828 0.690 0.729	0.841	0.846	0.883	0.557
Profesional Support	PS1 PS2 PS5 PS6	0.643 0.545 0.842 0.831	0.860	0.867	0.899	0.604

	PS7 PS8	0.867 0.872				
Teacher Burnout	TB2 TB3 TB4 TB6 TB7 TB8	0.707 0.832 0.585 0.737 0.876 0.761	0.846	0.862	0.887	0.571
Teacher Stress	TS1 TS2 TS4 TS5 TS6 TS7	0.889 0.796 0.842 0.885 0.844 0.701	0.907	0.917	0.929	0.686

Discriminant validity is assessed using stringent criteria, specifically the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015). The study by Hamid et al. (Hamid et al., 2017) demonstrated that the HTMT criterion exhibits superior sensitivity in identifying discriminant validity compared to the cross-loadings method and the Fornell and Larcker criterion. The HTMT values presented in Table 3 are below 0.90, ranging from 0.565 to 0.888. The findings indicate that all constructs exhibit realistic diversity. Consequently, the validity of the discriminant is confirmed (Henseler et al., 2014).

Table 3. Discriminant validity: Heterotrait Monotrait Ratio criterion

Construct	**WL**	**PS**	**TB**	**TS**
Workload				
Profesional Support	0.565			
Teacher Burnout	0.749	0.714		
Teacher Stress	0.598	0.729	0.888	

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 presents the results of the structural model testing, which examined the relationships between workload, professional support, teacher stress, and teacher burnout among Malaysian preschool teachers. Hypotheses were validated by assessing t-values and ρ-values, with acceptance criteria set at t-value ≥ 1.645 or ρ-value < 0.05. The findings indicated that workload was significantly and positively related to professional support ($\beta = 0.5$, $t = 6.217$, $\rho < 0.05$), teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 3.87$, $\rho < 0.05$), and teacher stress ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 3.26$, $\rho < 0.01$). Professional support was significantly associated with teacher stress ($\beta = 0.51$, $t = 6.431$, $\rho < 0.01$) but not with teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.102$, $t = 0.962$, $\rho > 0.05$). Additionally, teacher burnout demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with teacher stress ($\beta = 0.57$, $t = 4.888$, $\rho < 0.01$). Consequently, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H5, and H6 were supported, while H4 was rejected.

Table 4. Summary of the Structural Model

Hypothesis	Path	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p values	Decision
H1	WL -> PS	0.496	0.080	6.217	0.000	Suported
H2	WL -> TB	0.287	0.074	3.876	0.000	Suported
H3	WL -> TS	0.280	0.086	3.263	0.001	Suported
H4	PS -> TB	0.102	0.106	0.962	0.336	Rejected
H5	PS -> TS	0.514	0.080	6.431	0.000	Suported
H6	TS -> TB	0.569	0.116	4.888	0.000	Suported

Note. ρ < 0.05 (t-value ≥ 1.645)

Table 5 shows a multiple regression model with gender, age, salary, experience, workload, professional support, and teacher stress as predictors of teacher burnout showed a strong predictive value ($R = 0.854$). The R^2 value, which explains the proportion of variance accounted for by the independent variables in the model, is 0.73 (73%), signifying that 73% of the variability in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables. Table 5 also evaluates the model's overall fit, showing that the independent variables significantly predict the dependent variable ($F(7, 72) = 27.701$, $p < .0005$), confirming that the regression model is a good fit for the data. However,

as shown in Table ~~12~~5, gender, age, salary, experience, and professional support were not significant predictors of teacher burnout (t-value < 1.645 or ρ-value ≥ 0.05). Conversely, workload and teacher stress emerged as significant predictors of teacher burnout (t-value ≥ 1.645 or ρ-value < 0.05).

Table 5. Multiple Regression Model

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Decisions
1	(Constant)	-.309	.443		-.696	.489	
	Gender	.109	.214	.032	.511	.611	Rejected
	Age	-.068	.119	-.066	-.568	.572	Rejected
	Salary	-.002	.043	-.004	-.051	.959	Rejected
	Experience	.034	.051	.076	.659	.512	Rejected
	WL	.343	.094	.307	3.662	.000	Supported
	PS	.094	.104	.084	.900	.371	Rejected
	TS	.556	.082	.589	6.787	.000	Supported

This research found that demographic information does not predict teacher burnout, although workload and teacher stress does. This is in light with other research where they have mentioned that age, gender, and prior teaching experience did not always correlate and linked to teacher burnout and stress. Research have also shown that more burned-out instructors had a higher inclination to leave the profession (Agyapong et al., 2022; McDaniel et al., 2024; Schulze-Hagenest et al., 2023). Plans for turnover may have been due to exhaustion, and stress and burnout (Upadyaya et al., n.d.). According to (Jomuad et al., 2021) the teaching profession involves a lot of responsibilities, many of which contribute to the sense of a demanding workload. Meetings, administrative paperwork, after school activities, training, being contacted by parents, and other work assignments are further instances of workplace demands for teachers. Almost half of the teachers that were interviewed in their research claimed that increased administrative work obligations had contributed to their already heavy burden. The teachers also reported that on top of administration and teaching, they had to also learn new technological systems. All these contribute to workload and teacher stress. Teachers are also overworked as there have been an increase in beaureracy, more paperwork, and many other tasks on top of keeping up with their students, which has contributed greatly to teacher stress and eventually burnout (Jomuad et al., 2021; Ratanasiripong et al., 2022)

5. RECOMMENDATION

Building a sustainable workforce of early childhood educators is not easy. This could be attributed to high turnover rates stemming from low salaries, insufficient training, and high workloads. Research highlights that many educators experience clinically severe depressive symptoms and report high levels of stress due to their roles (Fradelos et al., 2023; Peele & Wolf, 2021). To address these issues, institutions must prioritize teacher well-being through comprehensive professional support systems and targeted interventions that can help reduce stress, burnout, and attrition (Beames et al., 2023). This can be done by implementing programs targeted for teacher's wellbeing (Zito et al., 2024). Similar to how schools collaborate with clinics and hospitals when it comes to student vaccinations, they can also do a program for teacher's health. Art therapy and group therapy can also play a critical role in reducing teacher stress (del Río Diéguez et al., 2024). Usually teachers function as caregivers, leaving little room to seek support for their own challenges. Programs such as these can help normalize seeking assistance and create environments where teachers can feel supported and valued, reducing feelings of isolation and stress. As professional support was significant in this study, it shows how important the school ecosystem is. The network between educational leaders, administrators and teachers should be strengthened through programs such as peer mentoring or programs that would keep the communication open to help foster stronger relationships.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Early education is extremely important, and teachers have a huge impact on how children perceive education and learning. Recognizing and understanding problems faced by early childhood educators could help reduce teacher stress and retain teachers in the long run. One main takeaway from this research was the connection between burnout and teacher turnover. This research emphasizes the need for decision-makers to assess this relationship and implement measures to reduce burnout and attrition in schools to retain skilled educators. It is also to safeguard the quality of early childhood education, as there are not many policies on teacher burnout (Madigan et al., 2023). This research has highlighted some importance for educational leadership in terms of teacher stress and burnout, but future studies could benefit by looking deeper into specific needs of the preschool teachers and how policies

on burnout could impact them. School leaders play a pivotal role in supporting teachers' psychological needs through thoughtful administrative practices. This includes providing adequate resources and fostering an environment that prioritizes teachers' well-being. In conclusion, early childhood educators play a vital role in shaping young lives. Supporting their well-being through research, policy, and leadership initiatives is extremely important to ensuring a sustainable workforce. By prioritizing educators' intrinsic motivations and addressing the shortcomings, policy makers can help create environments where teachers as well as students flourish.

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