Research Article

Sociocultural Adjustments of Foreign College Students in De La Salle Lipa

Geraldine Flores
De La Salle Lipa
geraldine.flores@dlsl.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

De La Salle Lipa, being a prime higher education institution in the region, attracts college enrollees from various nearby provinces and from other countries as well. Such diversity results in having students with different cultural backgrounds and origins. Thus, this study aimed to describe the sociocultural adjustments experienced by foreign college students of DLSL. The descriptive qualitative research design was used to gather information from four foreign college students who were enrolled for the first semester of S.Y. 2019-2020. Through in-depth interviews, the study explored the participants’ personal observation, challenges, and coping mechanisms relating to their sociocultural adjustments in DLSL. Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the gathered data and recommendations were drawn from the suggestions of the respondents. It was found that the foreign college students have experienced various areas of sociocultural adjustments. They expressed that some positive Filipino values and practices made it easier for them to adjust and cope in the new environment. The kind nature and hospitality of their fellow students made them feel more welcome and secure. On the other hand, they have also expressed some challenges particularly in learning and communicating in the Filipino language. According to them, this was particularly experienced in instances when Filipino is used as the medium of instruction.

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, higher education institutions become a melting pot to diverse groups of students when it comes to enrollment. Enrollees to a particular college or university are those living within the locality, others come from nearby and distant provinces, and still, there are foreign students. The diverse groups of first year students whose points of residence vary comes with various challenges and difficulties. One of these challenges is the sociocultural adjustment which occurs in an environment that comes with a different set of culture and ways of living (Hirai, Frazier, & Syed, 2015). “Sociocultural adjustments involve learning local cultural values and the skills needed to manage everyday activities, such as making friends and getting around in the community” (Lee & Pistole, 2014, p. 1).

De La Salle Lipa, being a prime higher education institution in the region, attracts enrollees from nearby provinces and from other countries as well. Such diversity results in having students with different cultural backgrounds and origins that render the possibility that the said group experienced sociocultural adjustments. “The main challenge of higher education institutions is how to manage intercultural diversity and overcome intercultural learning challenges that affect
international students’ learning outcomes and learning sustainability” (Yassin et al., 2020, p. 1). A student’s inability or difficulty to fit in a social group may result in poor academic performance, low self-esteem, unhappy college life, or college dropout (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2016). According to Ahrari et al (2019), “Understanding adjustment among international students is vital to ensure that they obtain the best possible learning and living experience in their respective host environments” (p. 2).

The conceptual framework of the study as shown in Figure 1 explains the aim of the study which is to discover the sociocultural adjustments experienced by four foreign college students enrolled in De La Salle Lipa for the first semester of the school year 2019-2020. Foreign students are college students who are not Filipinos and are not raised in the Philippines. Sociocultural theory explains the individual’s mental functioning as the person relates to cultural, institutional and historical contexts (Scott, 2013). In the case of foreign college students in DLSL, how they relate with other Filipinos especially in the campus is part of their sociocultural experience in the Philippines. To be able to determine the sociocultural adjustments of the foreign college students, the researcher asked their personal observations with regard to the Filipino values and traits which they found particularly new or different from their own culture. After that, the foreign college students were requested to share the challenges that they have experienced in relating with Filipinos. They were also asked to identify the coping mechanism to adjust to the socio-cultural differences they experienced in the Philippines. The gathered information from the respondents assisted the researcher to explore a possible need that has to be addressed as driven by the challenges the foreign college students experienced.

Based on the students’ narratives of their experiences, the researcher gathered first-hand data that were necessary to recommend programs and services for foreign college students. Furthermore, this can aid DLSL in creating activities that will consider foreign college students as well. This is to ensure that assistance will be provided, not only to Filipino students, but also to foreign students who might be experiencing some difficulties particularly in transitioning into a new and unfamiliar cultural environment. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a resource which may be used in further developments of school programs and services that will provide all students with equal opportunity to achieve academic success and well-being.

There are current research studies that explore the sociocultural adjustments of foreign students. These students are experiencing adjustments in the host country where they are enrolled and at the same time
to their the transition from senior high school to college. The tribal college students’ environment is different from non-tribal college students. In the tribal community, their environment is smooth, they are oriented with each other, and have simple living and fewer expectations. Unlike non-tribal communities that have a more complicated environment (Gavit, 2016). However, the result is different from the study of Hafiz (2015) which found that students from urban areas can adjust better than students from rural areas. Indeed, adjustment is really affected by many factors. Therefore, different adjustment levels take place depending on the place of origin and the socio-cultural values that foreign college students grew up with. The environment where they originated may have an impact on their adjustment.

According to Marino, Montalbo, and Bugtong (2017), students studying abroad experience huge adjustment stress because they are at the same time adjusting themselves in a country as their new environment. “International students experience homesickness because of not having experience living in a different culture and country” (Ali, Yoenanto & Nurdibyanandaru, 2020, p.1). Aside from that, their educational transitions from senior high school to college is another adjustment to consider. In a study of Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015), they found out that international students deal with academic challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment. It was mentioned that communication with professors, classmates, and staff are the academic challenges they face. In terms of group activities, they feel socially isolated when engaging in it. Another study about the factors that contribute to the academic, cultural, social, and psychological adjustments of international students was written by Mesidor and Sly (2016). Their research revealed that the adjustment issues of the international students include psychological distress such as homesickness, depression, and anxiety. Since they are away from their own families, it is possible that foreign students experience these situations. Many international students undergo psychological feelings and struggle with cross-cultural adjustment (Iwara, Kativhu, & Obadire, 2017). Also, “Mental health problems commonly prevail among international students as a result of acculturative difficulties,” as mentioned in the study of Gebregergis, Huang and Hong (2019, p. 1). It was supported by the study of Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) that many international students struggle with isolation and marginalization. Another problem encountered by foreign students is language and social interaction. In a study of Akedeiwei et al. (2015), it was found out that Nigerian foreign students strongly agreed with the language, communication, social interaction and academic life challenge. “Communication and language problems are the greatest area of adjustment concerns of the international students” (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 6). Foreign students may not be familiar with the language of the host country that results in poor communication skills. With this situation, they are not able to interact well with other students, which makes them also not fully prepared for their academic life. However, in a study of international students in Australia, findings exposed that the most significant issues in terms
of satisfaction were not directly related to academic studies. Instead, factors such as integration into the community, interacting with other students, and relationships with supervisors, and the provision of sufficient desk space were often given the greatest factor (Yu & Wright, 2016). Thus, foreign college students enrolled in DLSL may experience adjustment since they are not familiar with the culture of the Philippines. Commonly, foreign students who are new to their environment may experience stress that can affect their academic performance and overall functioning as well. In a study by Iorga et al (2020), they mentioned that “The choice to study abroad has a substantial impact on the student and the acculturation process can lead to acculturative stress and difficulties adjusting to the environment of the host country” (p1).

The international students should learn various ways to deal with their adjustment problems. In the study of Marino et al. (2017), they found out that the international students in Batangas identified that the best coping mechanism for them was to learn the language of the locals, increase friends and consider visiting the beautiful places nearby. “International students may rely on social groups and their newly adopted institutions as major sources of support” (Shu, 2020, p. 8). Another study about Nigerian students in the Philippines revealed that most of the respondents utilized social networks as a coping mechanism. According to the respondents, these networks engage them, making it possible for them to bring very large world together in a simple and easy way which assists them to be connected with friends, family and long-lost college friends (Lucky, Olaniyi, Norris, Olalekan, & Ayodeji, 2015). However, in some studies, like the international students enrolled in the United States, they suggested that they needed to face the different ways of thinking and doing in the US to be able to adjust well. Also, these students were able to adjust because of the support of the university where they are enrolled in (Wu et al 2015). In the study of Chuah & Singh (2016), it was revealed that international students wanted frequent social support from host national students. Aside from the support group, positive attitude, interaction with Japanese friends, financial assistance, and useful learning strategies were mentioned as coping strategies in a study about international students in Japan (Lee, 2017).

Indeed, foreign college students may expect social support from fellow students who are from the Philippines to cope up with the sociocultural adjustments that they may experience. As they are new in the Philippines, they expect other students to understand them. The role of social networks enables them also to be connected with people who are not physically with them. In that way, they can adjust with the new environment. “Adjustment to college is an important factor in academic and persistence outcomes, and is linked to a student’s experience” (Ball, McGowan & Predvil, 2020, p.10). Several factors may also affect how students will adjust to their college life. Sociocultural adjustments are inevitable situations that a student from another place should be prepared for. It is one of the challenges that might determine his
readiness to socialize with other students who have different cultures. On the other hand, different coping mechanisms are available to adapt to the sociocultural adjustments they are facing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the sociocultural adjustments of foreign college students. As a publication requirement, the research paper went through an ethical review to ensure that appropriate interaction and worthy inquiries were done and raised by the researcher with the participants. The Research Ethics Committee of the institution dealt with the cycle of endorsement of the research paper. The data collection procedure was described to make sure that it did not violate any ethical standard. Also, a checklist that refers to the ethical considerations in the conduct of research with human participants was accomplished. Each question to be asked was clearly evaluated to make sure that no harm will be felt by the respondents. The list of foreign college students was inquired from the DLSL Sustainable Development and International Linkages Office. According to their record, there are four foreign college students enrolled in DLSL for the first semester of S.Y. 2019-2020. Purposive sampling was used to identify the respondents since the researcher defined that the foreign college students are not Filipinos and are not raised in the Philippines.

The researcher issued a call slip to invite the identified four foreign college students to visit the College Guidance and Counseling Center (CGCC). Giving call slips is normally done by the CGCC when inviting students for a conversation. This kind of invitation was a norm in the campus. It was the most straightforward approach to welcome a student in the CGCC to have the option to chat with them right away. Upon their visit, the researcher explained the reason why they were invited to visit the CGCC. By initiating informed consent, the researcher communicated and explained the nature and purpose of the study. The foreign students were then asked if they were willing to engage in the research study. The researcher emphasized that their participation will be voluntary. The four foreign college students did not have a second thought in participating in the study. Upon confirming their commitment, the researcher and the participant agreed on the scheduled date and time to have the interview. After that, they were asked to sign the the informed written consent indicating their voluntary participation and their permission to voice record the interview. The participants’ identity was kept confidential.

In-depth interviews with four foreign college students enrolled for the first semester of S.Y. 2019-2020 were conducted to know their personal observations, challenges, and coping mechanisms they experienced with regard to their sociocultural adjustments in the Philippines. The interviews were conducted for about 30 minutes using the English language. The interviews were recorded. The researcher utilized guide questions to facilitate the interview. Recommendations to the school’s program and services were also asked to assist them in overcoming sociocultural adjustments.
The data were analyzed based on the procedures of thematic analysis. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) defined thematic analysis as a procedure of recognizing patterns or themes within qualitative data.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Thematic analysis was applied to the data. Using the guided questions raised during the in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to derive themes based on the participants’ responses. The emerging themes were categorized based on the personal observations, challenges and coping mechanisms of the foreign students on their socio-cultural adjustments. For their personal observations, the foreign college students mentioned that Filipinos are religious, respectful and kind to others. The participants also noticed that the way Filipinos greet the elders is something that they generally see as a different practice to them. For the challenges, the foreign college students consistently mentioned the language barrier. Their coping mechanisms to overcome their challenges are to spend more time with Filipinos and to exert an effort to learn the language.

The participants observed that Filipinos are religious, respectful and generous. They shared these observations when asked about the sociocultural practices of the Filipinos they have observed. According to Carbayas and del Castillo (2020), “Religiosity plays a very important role in the life of a Catholic Filipino” (p. 1). Filipinos’ religiosity is observed in the religious customs and traditions that the Filipinos are practicing. Particularly, the Filipinos’ rites and ceremonies, fiestas, processions, pilgrimages, novenas, and countless devotional practices exemplify their spiritual relationship and religiosity (Ramos, 2015). Among the Filipino values include respect for elders, the importance of family, the importance of education, hard work, frugality, hospitality, and welcoming attitude (Ona, 2015). Some of these values have been observed by the participants during their stay in the Philippines. As they get to meet Filipinos, they continue to discover many things about them.

One participant said, “But when we came here, we noticed there is religiosity here.” The majority of the Filipinos are Roman Catholics comprising 80% of the population (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017). This is the reason why the religiosity of the Filipinos is evident in their ways of living. The Filipino youth are religious as mentioned in a study regarding religiosity and spirituality of the Filipinos (Batara, 2015). The religiosity of the Filipinos can be noticed in the practices they are consistently doing to express their faith in God. Foreign college students enrolled in DLSL have also witnessed how Filipinos expressed their faith through joining spiritual activities. Particularly, they have mentioned how the Filipinos are devoted to praying the novena and their commitment to attend the mass every day as part of their spiritual nurture for themselves. “You pray like the novena. They are so committed,” shared by one participant. Also, the participant mentioned “Especially when you go to the chapel. Every morning you see people in the mass.” These practices create an impression to them that Filipinos are religious.
Furthermore, the participants noted the kindness they have experienced with Filipinos. One participant stated, “Most of the Filipinos are too kind for me.” Another participant stated, “The students are really kind and generous.” In a study of international students in Batangas, the respondents recognized the friendliness and hospitality of the locals. It was mentioned that these traits facilitated the international students in their adjustments. (Marino et al., 2017). Even though they are having difficulty as foreign students in the Philippines, the kindness that they experienced helped them overcome their adjustments. They felt that even if they experienced difficulties, they were able to surpass it through the help of the Filipinos. One participant shared, “They always inform me of the Filipino language.” They feel that Filipino students are concerned if they understand the Filipino language. Their classmates try to translate the Filipino language to English for them to better understand it. These experiences have made them feel the kindness that Filipinos are showing to them. They appreciate it and are thankful for the concern of their classmates.

Another observation is the trait of the Filipinos as respectful people. They have witnessed the respect for elders of the Filipinos by asking a blessing from the elders. Furthermore, Filipinos have a tradition of respect for one’s elders. This is the reason why caring for older people is commonly under the care of family members unlike in other countries. Also, the Philippines is celebrating the Elderly Filipino Week every first week of October (Lucentales, 2016). The foreign students have also stated the respect shown by the Filipinos to religious people. One participant shared “I noticed that religious people are respected here compared to Kenya. Maybe because there are more Catholics here.” As the participants collaborate with locals, they witness the respect the Filipino gives to one another, especially to the elders. They see it as a good trait that they appreciate.

The way Filipinos greet the elders is something that the participants generally see as a different practice to them. “Foreign students experience slight difficulty in understanding the Philippine culture and traditions,” as mentioned in a study of San Diego (2017, p. 4). One participant shared that they were surprised when students asked for a blessing from them. “That is really different from ours and we feel that you do it to show respect,” shared by one participant. In a study about the Filipino values portrayed in the Pinoy Big Brother show, the results indicated that asking a blessing from elders or kissing their hands was one of the Filipino values the respondents identified as positive (Chico, 2012). It indicates that it is a way for the Filipinos to show their respect to elders. The participants mentioned that asking for a blessing in the forehead is new to them. “Actually, the first thing that surprised me is the greetings,” expressed by one participant. Another participant noticed that the students are asking for blessings from their teachers. They felt it was unusual but later on, they also embraced that practice. They were able to understand that it is a part of the Filipino culture. A participant said “One thing is that Filipinos are very sensitive in Religion. I can see some students walking around and they get blessed by
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The participants consistently mentioned the language barrier as one of the most pressing challenges that they encountered as they adjusted to the Philippines. Although one of the common reasons why they chose to study in the Philippines is to also learn and hone their English skills, the language barrier is still a major concern for them. “The most difficult challenge for many international students is their inability to communicate with other students due to low English proficiency,” as discussed in the study of Vakkai et al., (2020, p. 6). One participant shared “Because in Korea it is important to speak fluently in English because in Korea the main language is Korea. I think most of them are not that good at speaking in English.”

When asked about the challenges he experienced during the first few days, one participant responded, “When I came here for the first time, the biggest barrier was the language.” He acknowledged that the struggle to understand the Filipino language is a serious issue. The participant is aware that learning the language must be done to adapt to the Philippines. Another participant uttered, “Obviously, learning the language.” It clearly identified that language is a serious issue for them. In a study by Lucky et al (2015), they noted that language barrier challenges are normally experienced by students going to countries where the language used is a foreign language to them. The incident is the same with the foreign college students enrolled in DLSL. They shared their difficulties in understanding the Filipino language. According to Kim (2020), “The language barrier and cultural differences were major factors impeding the overseas students’ adjustment” (p. 19).

Another participant mentioned, “If you do not know the language it is difficult to socialize with people.” They feel that language is important to relate with other Filipinos. “Like during class and when I’m with other Filipino students, they also speak Tagalog and I don’t really understand them. I always request them to translate it. That was the most challenging,” expressed by one participant. It indicates the concern he experienced relating with his classmates because of the language barrier. This affects not only their social relationship but their academics since they do not understand the Filipino language. “Some teachers will not really have the sensitivity of speaking in English. Some of them are good but maybe they forget that there is a foreigner. So they go on like explaining in Tagalog,” expressed by one participant. A participant mentioned that if a teacher speaks in Filipino, it becomes difficult for him to understand the lesson. It is important for them that the English language must be used, especially if it is the required medium of instruction in the classroom for foreigners to understand and relate to the lesson.

As revealed in a study, the language difficulty of
international students may result in inferiority to others especially to local students who are native speakers of the language (Akedeiwei et al., 2015). In the case of the foreign students in DLSL, it initially resulted in their struggle in communicating with friends and comprehending the lesson. “The students found that language was a barrier in their interactions with the locals,” as supported by the study of Tuerxun et al., (2020, p. 1). A participant shared that when he does not understand the Filipino language of a teacher he tells, “Kindly repeat. Sometimes I do not have the courage to tell that. But that is really something that may be frustrating for a foreign student.” It indicates participants’ negative feelings towards the situation of not understanding the Filipino language. Furthermore, a participant also articulated that comprehending not only the Filipino language but also the English language is a serious challenge for him. A participant said “Because I am a Korean I don’t know how to speak English and Filipino…and I came here to study English. At first, I couldn’t communicate with friends. I also don’t understand what the teacher is saying.” In this case, both Filipino and English languages are new to him. He is aware that he needs to put effort into learning both languages.

The participants commonly expressed that to be able to cope with the challenge of the language barrier, they have to spend more time with Filipinos. They recognized the positive outcome if they socialize with other Filipinos rather than staying alone in DLSL. One participant shared “I noticed that some foreign students are afraid to go with Filipinos because of the language barrier but for me, I tried to spend more time with Filipinos so that I can understand their language.” Another participant said, “I like staying with Filipinos instead of staying alone.” This positive move makes the participants engage with other Filipinos that improves their language barrier.

The participants are aware that being with other Filipinos will make them learn the language. Furthermore, they also feel that the support of their Filipino friends is helpful for them. It was supported in a study that the social support of host national students to international students is very significant (Chuah & Singh, 2016). Even though the foreign students are having difficulty in their adjustments, they feel that if Filipinos are present for them, they can manage it. “The more social connections international students have, the better they would do at school and the more likely they will persist towards graduation” (Rabia & Karkouti, 2017, p. 4). In a study by Baklashova and Kazakov (2016), they mentioned that foreign students expect language support from their classmates. The support they get from their classmates helps them to learn the language easily and understand the meaning of words their classmates and teachers speak. A participant mentioned, “For language, I’m still learning and keep asking my friends the meaning.” With this, they acknowledge the importance of having Filipino friends who will guide them, especially in the use of the Filipino language.

Another coping mechanism they have stated is having an effort to learn the language. One participant
said, “Like for the language culture, I started learning the Tagalog Language in Language Learning Center and one of my Filipino friends also started learning the Korean Language.” The participants also see the need to learn the language for them to survive in the Philippines. They are aware that language is very significant as they adjust to a foreign land. They view it as an important need that they have to immediately address. “Because I need to. We now go to the community,” expressed by one participant. It reflects the urgency to study the language because of the need to socialize and relate with the community.

Moreover, a participant emphasized that learning the language both English and Filipino is the tool for him to surpass the language barrier he experienced. He also revealed that because of the language barrier he thought of going back to his home. The participant shared “No, I’m fine. But at first, I thought of going back to Korea because of the language problem.” It indicates that when a person does not understand the language of a foreign land, it may result in undesirable feelings. Thus, learning the language is a tool to minimize such concern.

The study of Marvan (2016) discussed that to be able to overcome foreign language anxiety, the students need preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking. Moreover, preparation indicates an eagerness to know the language while peer seeking is also a tool to minimize language difficulty. Since the participants shared that they are spending time with Filipinos and they exert an effort to learn the Filipino language, it is an indication of the positive move they are doing to address the language difficulty they are experiencing. It was mentioned by Kizi and Ugli (2020) that “The most effective of learning of foreign language is studying the culture of the target language” (p. 1)

Analysis of the results suggests that while the foreign college students feel the warm and positive traits of the Filipinos that they deal with, appropriate programs and services should still be given to them to be able to adapt easily in the Philippines. The themes of the study suggest that the foreign college students noticed the religiosity, kindness, and respectfulness of the Filipinos. The foreign students recognized that the Filipino traits have been helpful for them to adjust as they stay in the Philippines. However, as mentioned by the foreign college students, the language barrier is a serious issue that they experience as they stay here. This concept is greatly supported by the theme formed during the qualitative analysis of the challenge the foreign college experienced. Their concern about the language barrier also impacts their way to comprehend the lesson making it challenging for their student life on the campus. To cope with this, they exerted efforts to practice and learn the language by engaging themselves more with their Filipino peers. Language barrier has increased their determination to learn the Filipino language and has reinforced their will to adjust socially to their environment. The experiences shared by the foreign college students have compelled the CGCC and other members of the school community to develop programs and services.
as a form of intervention to the challenges they met. The programs and services will ensure that all college students will receive the essential assistance required to overcome challenges and succeed in their college life during their stay in the Philippines.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established that foreign college students enrolled in DLSL experienced sociocultural adjustments. Furthermore, the foreign college students have observed that the positive values and traits of the Filipinos facilitated their adjustment to the Philippines. Therefore, the attitude of the locals is a significant factor in the sociocultural adjustments of the foreign college students. Also, the way Filipinos greet the elders is something that the participants generally perceive as a different practice to them. However, the participants were able to embrace it and understand that it is part of the Filipino culture. The foreign college students personally practiced some of the Filipino traditions since they were able to understand their meaning.

It can also be noted that foreign college students are experiencing difficulty adjusting because of the language barrier. Nevertheless, they have overcome that concern by trying to expose themselves to Filipinos and exerting an effort to learn the language. Thus, the language barrier they experienced also affects their academic performance if most of the Filipinos they relate with, including their teachers speak their native language or Tagalog in particular. The sociocultural adjustments experienced by the foreign students, particularly the language barrier, should be addressed as a way of assisting them during their adjustment period in the Philippines.

The current studies dealt only with the sociocultural adjustment of four foreign college students from De La Salle Lipa, Future researchers may conduct a similar study targeting more foreign college students in the region. Also, an in-depth study on the effects of the language barriers in their learning experience can be done.

The researcher recommends the following programs and services to assist the sociocultural adjustments experienced by the college foreign students:

Initiate a tutorial program. It will assist the foreign students in learning the basic Filipino language. The tutorial program will minimize the language barrier they feel during their stay in the Philippines.

Plan an orientation program of the Filipino culture and tradition. It will prepare the foreign students for what they can expect from the Filipinos. This will give them an idea of how they can relate to Filipinos.

Meet other foreign students. It will make the foreign students feel that they are not the only foreign students on the campus. It will be a chance for them to interact and collaborate with other foreign college students. This is also a potential support group for them.

Promote the values of multiculturalism. It will
help other Filipino students understand the culture of other foreign students. It is also a tool that can reinforce the uniqueness of one’s culture. The promotion of multiculturalism will also increase the knowledge of the Filipinos regarding foreign students.

Promote Diversity. The knowledge of culture diversity will help other Filipino students be sensitive to the different needs of other foreign students. It will guide the Filipino students to be more aware of how they can better relate with other foreign students.

Encourage the use of English Language. The students and teachers are encouraged to use the English Language especially if there are foreign college students in their class to minimize the language barrier they experience in the classroom and on the campus as well.

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