

The sexual trajectories of young Brazilians: from initiation to the possibility of pregnancy

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.



The sexual trajectories of young Brazilians: from initiation to the possibility of pregnancy*

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Introduction

The life course can be described as a succession of changes in one's situation. Analysis of life trajectories brings forth changes and moments of stability. Actors are simultaneously active and passive in their biographies—that is, not everything that happens to them is by choice, nor the result of social coercion. In adolescence, one of the main transitions is the establishment of sexual activity with a partner. In Brazil, this occurs later and more gradually than what current stereotypes about young people's sexuality suppose (Benfam, 1997). Learning about sexuality is not limited to learning about one's genitals, nor to the first sexual relation. It is a process of experimentation that accelerates in adolescence and youth and is characterized by the strong influence of the peer group's sexual culture.

In Brazilian society gender relations within the realm of sexuality are strongly codified. Young people's sexual sociability follows a marked division between men and women's roles. A *steady relationship* (*namoro*) between youths is an exclusive relationship between two partners who call themselves *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* and which, in its traditional form, can remain chaste for a long time. The relationship has an official character within the family and the young peoples' circle of friends (Azevedo, 1981). In its traditional form, the *steady relationship* is a sort of choreography: the man establishes the relationship in order to later request favors to which the woman can only progressively agree to. Male insistence and the female resistance are expected behaviors. Over time, bodily contacts become more intimate and more varied insofar as it is necessary to retain the man's interest in order to continue the relationship. However, in the traditional version of the *steady relationship*, vaginal penetration remains forbidden so as to preserve virginity. To younger generations, the *steady relationship* still constitutes the expected framework for exclusive relationships between people who are in love and who are under a social network's supervision. Female testimony in qualitative research highlights the pressure

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exerted by men for the women to have sex. However, this scenario has changed over the past two decades. There has been a reduction in the age at which women engage in their first sexual relation, although women continue to manage the rhythm of sexual approximation (Bozon & Heilborn, 2001).

In the 1980s, a new mode of encounter called “*hooking up*” (“*ficar*”) spread among young people. In this type of relationship, which is usually established in public places (at parties, nights out, in clubs and bars), attraction gives rise to immediate bodily contact (kisses, caresses, even sex), without this entailing commitment between the partners (Schuch, 1998). Generally speaking, there is no perspective for continuing the relationship. The models of *steady relationship* and *hooking up* thus imply opposite behaviors.

Brazilian sexual culture is marked by a strong system of binary gender categories—male and female, masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity—that provides actors with a framework which they use to read behaviors. Because it is a strictly dichotomous system, men cannot allow themselves to behave in ways that lead to even the smallest doubt about their masculinity (Parker, 1991). In adolescence, it is common for young men to be expected to demonstrate their virility; for example. A few decades ago, it was traditional for fathers to take their sons, as soon as possible, to be sexually initiated by sex workers. Likewise, in this system women are taught to avoid male advances with a firm attitude if they wish to preserve their reputation as “honest” women. Young women are expected to display a type of conduct that appears passive and “naive” to their partners and which makes it difficult for them to discuss issues related to sexuality or contraception with a man.

Maternity is also a highly valued component of femininity in this system, which is expressed by the ideal of having one’s first child at a very young age. In this setting of clearly designated attitudes and roles for each of the genders, sexual relations between men and women are experienced as a product of spontaneity: it is culturally unlikely that a first sexual relation will be discussed or prepared for beforehand. The traditional *steady relationship* dynamic continues to structure scripts regarding sexual relations, especially during adolescence. Men ask for sexual activity and women respond by giving in, refusing, or delaying. In accordance with cultural rules, it is therefore extremely easy for women to have an unprotected first sexual relation after “giving in” to their partners. Preparing for one’s first relation would imply forethought and, therefore, an active posture, giving the impression that the women are “experienced”, which leads to doubts about their morality. While social acceptance of female youth’s sexuality is fragile, social acceptance for their use of contraception is even weaker.

The present article seeks to illuminate the contexts of the passage of young Brazilians towards the exercise of adult sexuality as members of a couple among through an examination of the first sexual experience. The present article seeks to illuminate the

contexts of the first sexual experience of young Brazilians with a partner. Our findings indicate a relative (un)preparedness among youths to become involved in sexual activity with their partners, and the lack of use of contraception/protection during their first sexual relation (Cf. Heilborn et al., 2006).

Methodological strategy

The Gravada¹ study does not address the Brazilian population as a whole, being limited to three large cities: Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and Salvador (BA). These cities are located in very different regions (South, Southeast and Northeast). The investigation brought together two research projects, one based on semi-structured interviews (n=123, 41 in each city) and carried out in 1999–2000; the second based on a door-to-door survey concluded in 2002, which utilized a three-stage stratified random sampling of men and women between the ages of 18 and 24 years (n=4634).

Each city's census sectors (CS) were stratified and grouped into five strata, according to their inhabitants' socioeconomic indicators (average income of the head of the household and proportion of heads of households with twelve or more years of education). The sector samples were independently constructed in each stratum, with a random selection proportional to the number of youths aged 18 to 24 years. In each selected CS, a list of all permanent private households with inhabitants between 18 and 24 years was produced. Based on this list, 33 households were randomly selected with equiprobability and without replacement. In these households, a young person was randomly selected to be interviewed.

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire that was structured and elaborated based on results obtained during the qualitative stage. The instrument used has the same set of questions for both sexes. These were formulated according to the interviewee's sex.

The questionnaire focused on certain events in the youths' affective-sexual trajectories: their first and last sexual relations, their first relationship that lasted three months or more (and which included sexual relations), their first union, first break up, first and last pregnancy, first and last child, first abortion (spontaneous and induced) and current partner. The choice of these questions follows the format of international instruments and allows us to compare findings (Laumann *et al.*, 1994; Bozon, 1993).

The Gravada study differs from more traditional approaches regarding adolescent sexuality and pregnancy in three ways. First of all, it subordinates the issue of adolescent pregnancy to a broader analytical framework of learning about and experimenting with

¹ *Teenage Pregnancy: A Multicentric Study of Young People, Sexuality and Reproduction in Brazil.*

sexuality with a partner. The adoption of the concept of *youth as process* and not as *age group* is central to the strategy of evaluating the outcomes of a pregnancy or parenthood taking place during adolescence. The second innovation concerns methodological decentering regarding the age range defined as pertaining to “adolescents”. Insofar as the research’s object is a social process (youth) and not a social group (adolescents or young people), choosing a specific target-population as research subjects was not necessary. Thus, interviewees are young people between the ages of 18 and 24; that is, belonging to a slightly higher age range than that defined as “adolescent” by the World Health Organization—between 10 and 19 years of age. This shifting of the research’s focus toward an older population made it possible to have a more removed point of view regarding the processes under study. The third innovation was based on the sociological concept of adolescent sexuality and pregnancy, shifting away from traditional approaches that are especially prevalent in the field of public health. Our emphasis was on the *social processes* that are subjacent to events in the sphere of sexual and reproductive health.

Entering love life

The route to exercising sexuality with a partner is a progressive process of physical and relational exploration, characterized by stages that may be longer or shorter depending on individual biographies. The process of sexual socialization is characterized by collective milestones that originate within the peer group, establish rules for behavior and attribute status to partners. This process is basically oriented by two forms of relationships: the *steady relationship* and *hooking up*.

The vast majority of young participants in the Gravad study had already experienced an affective, committed relationship of the *steady relationship* type. The experience of *hooking up* was present to different degrees among the sexes (90% among men and 76% among women). The first *steady relationship* takes place shortly before the age of 15 for both men and women, taking place slightly later on only among those who pursue secondary or university education. The time interval that separated the beginning of the first *steady relationship* and the first sexual relation (which usually takes place with someone other than the first *boyfriend*) shows the different associations that men and women establish between the sexual and the relational from adolescence on. A good example of this gender differential is the fact that 13% of men had sex without ever having had a *steady relationship* or before having one. The same thing only occurs among 2% of the women. A greater proportion of women had experiences of *steady relationship* before they had sex, however (16%). Only 6% of the men fit into this category. Between the first *steady relationship* and the first sexual relation, men and women adopt different conducts. 38% of women had their sexual initiation at least four years after their first *steady relationship*: this was true with only 23% of the men. The temporal delay between entering an active love life and entering sexual activity is more characteristic of women who come from poorer segments of the population and are engaged in a process

of upward educational mobility.² This characteristic is absent among men with a similar social trajectory. The practice of old-fashioned chaste and prolonged *steady relationships* (Azevedo, 1981) clearly differentiates those women engaging in trajectories of educational ascension from those who went no further than basic education. Women with lower educational levels tend to engage in sexual activity as soon as they begin a *steady relationship*. On the other hand, women from more privileged segments of the population who attended secondary schools or universities show a certain tendency to delay their entrance into sex activity, but to a lesser degree. These findings highlight the way in which sexual experience is linked to social conditions and gender expectations (Heilborn, 1999).

“The first time”: an unequal experience

The first sexual relation is commonly described using easily objectifiable indicators such as the age at which an individual has their first sexual relation (Bozon, 1993). We can observe important modulations in the female calendar regarding entering into sexual relations according to several individual and social variables. This does not occur among young men. We therefore propose the hypothesis that the entrance into adult sexual life is not the same event for men and women.

Data from the Gravada study reveals that male initiation continues to occur at least two years earlier than female initiation (16.2 versus 17.9 years), in accordance with results from the 1996 DHS project in Brazil (Benfante, 1997). The literature indicates that this double standard is common in Latin America and in parts of Southeast Asia (Thailand). In Europe, it is characteristic of countries with a Latin or Mediterranean culture such as Italy, Greece and Portugal. In Nordic countries (such as Denmark), women tend to experience sexual initiation earlier than men (Bozon, 2003).

We observed great homogeneity with regards to men's median age of first sexual relation (16.2 years). These first experiences are strongly concentrated between 15 and 17 years, with the first quartile at 14.9 years. Only 20% of males are sexually initiated after 17. The most notable fact is that there are no differences according to region, social group membership, or factors such as color or race. Actors' individual trajectories reveal certain factors which contribute to diversity, however. Male sexual initiation takes place slightly later among those individuals with a higher educational level (going from 15.8 among men with lower educational levels to 16.7 years among those with higher educational levels). Young men who entered the job market earlier or who had a *steady relationship* before the age of 13 tended to also experience earlier sexual initiation (at the median age of 15 years). Faster access to sexuality expresses a general trend of precociousness in the individual's trajectory, signifying a shorter transition into adult life (Galland, 1995).

² *Upward educational mobility* refers to those youths who attain educational levels superior to those of their mothers. It is worth clarifying that educational level is an important indicator of social mobility in Brazil.

Women show a wider range of behaviors due to their origins and biographical characteristics. The mother's educational level and the family's level of income, which designate the families' social positions, both impact on the age of female sexual initiation. Women from poorer groups initiate their sex lives earlier. There has also been a reduction in the differences between social groups in comparison with older generations (Benfam, 1997). Color and race do not create significant differences on age of sexual initiation, a fact which counters certain stereotypes about certain ethnic groups in Brazilian society.

The influence of gender is quite marked in terms of the sexes' initiation into sexual activities. There are other significant differences in the definition of the first sexual relation, however, such as the partners' asymmetrical experiences with sex. The first sexual relation is usually experienced with a person who has already been sexually initiated (Bozon & Kontula, 1996). In 83% of the cases, women chose experienced partners for their first relation, as did 57% of the men. The age difference between partners at the first relation also reflects different experiences between men and women. Few women (2%) have their first sexual relation with a younger partner, a trend observed among 10% of the men. The majority of men have their initiation with a woman of the same age (50%) or with a partner at least 5 years older (15%). Women, who have their initiations later than men, have their first sexual relation with partners who are much older than them (the median is three years) and over one third of women's first partners (38%) are at least five years older. This inequality of experiences certainly has consequences with regards to the use of protection at this moment in peoples' sexual biographies.

Partners can also be characterized according to their status in the relationship. While 80% of women have their first experience with a *boyfriend* and 4% with their husbands, only 45% of men have their first experience with a *girlfriend*. Half of men but only 9% of women have their sexual initiation with an occasional partner during a *hook up*; 5% of men have their initiations with prostitutes. With regards to partners, we can affirm that there is a larger variety among male trajectories of sexual initiation, which contrasts greatly with the homogeneity of the female initiation experience—the latter takes place almost systematically with older, more experienced *boyfriends*.

The Gravad study's results enable us to construct a typology of ages for entry into sexual life: early, intermediary and late. However, these ages are not the same for men and women. Among men, the early group has their initiation around the age of 14 or less. This represents one quarter of men interviewed. The intermediary group had their sexual initiation between 15 and 16 years of age and this group corresponds to fifty percent of the male sample. The late group had their first sexual relation at 17 years of age or later. Among women, on the other hand, the early group started at 15 years or less and represents 28% of the women interviewed. The intermediary group started

between 16 and 17 years of age and represents 36% of the women. Finally, the late group had their initiation at 18 years of age or later and represents 36% of the female sample.

The typology proposed above highlights the contrasts apparent in trajectories of sexual initiation. Men and women with late initiations tend to have first partners with similar ages. Only 13% of the women who began their sex life before or at 15 years of age had a first partner of the same age. This proportion rises to 31% among women with late initiations. Half of men who had late initiations choose partners of the same age.

The rhythm and experience of relationship sexualization

The process of finding partners is also marked by significant gender differences. To men, the median duration of acquaintance prior to having sex with their first partner is only one month: 17% state they had sex the very day in which they met their first partner and 15% in the first week. Only 24% stated they knew the partner for more than four months prior to their first relation. Among women, on the other hand, the median duration for having known the first sexual partner before engaging in sexual relations was 6 months, with 57% of women stating that they had known him for more than four months. These differences between men and women do not depend on other social factors and match up with differences present in declarations regarding their partner's status (*boyfriend* or *hook up*).

The time elapsed between meeting the partner and having sex depends on actors' interpretation of the relationship. Only 9% of the men who had their first relation with a *girlfriend* moved on to having sex in the first week in which they met their partner (a proportion that is close to that generally declared by women). Rapid development of sexual relations is found among 52% of those who initiated their sex lives with an occasional partner, however.

Men and women clearly diverge in the implicit presentations of the roles they played in meeting their partners. From these stories, we can deduce that sexual relations are rarely events that can be planned. Regardless of social group or age at the time of the first sexual relation, more than half of men (57%) adopt the position most in line with common ideologies of masculinity in stating that they wanted the sexual relation to take place right away. Only 20% of the women (who were, on average, 18 years old at the time of the relation) adopt such an affirmative position, however. Women's attitudes are characterized by waiting and by passivity. Their most prevalent responses regarding initiating sexual relations were that "they did not think too much about it" (52%—also claimed by 30% of men) or that "they expected their first relation to happen later" (26%). This type of position, in which it is up to men to play an active role while women "should not think too much" about sexuality may lead to a "spontaneous" representation

of the sexual relation, which is cast as having been produced without either partner having truly thought about it.

The first sexual relation is an event that must be shared and made public in some way, especially to the peers. Only 17% of women and 12% of men state that they never talked about it with anyone. Both men and women first tell their friends, which accounts for half of responses regarding whom they first talked to about their experiences. Young women then choose to tell female family members, especially their mothers (16%), but never their fathers. Men, logically, announce the fact to their male family members (14%), which is in line with the division of gender that organizes sociability in Brazilian society. Confidences regarding the first time and discussions about sexuality in general thus do not cross sex boundaries, especially among women.

In short, for men, the first relation means the acquisition of an impatiently awaited attribute of virility (Heilborn, 1998); for women, it means one of the first stages of the passage to conjugality. The event is rarely experienced within a context of equality between the partners.

Contraception and protection during the “first time”

The framework of sexual initiation, in which very different situations prevail for men and women, produces consequences in terms of how contraception can be discussed and practiced by couples. In Brazil a heated debate concerning the number of pregnancies taking place in the age group referred to as *adolescent* has led to discussions regarding contraception and safe sex being placed at the center of health public policies for youth. Unexpected pregnancies are frequently associated with lack of use of contraception. This can occur due to a lack of knowledge or access. Being informed about contraceptive methods is not enough to guarantee their adequate use, a situation that is not limited to Brazil alone (Bajos & Ferrand, 2002).

The Gravad questionnaire asked questions that would contribute to discussions regarding the degree of youths' preparedness during their first sexual relation. We asked whether or not conversations took place with the partner before the first sexual relation. We also asked informants about their knowledge of ways to avoid pregnancy, aside from the traditional questions regarding type of protection or contraceptive methods used. Our findings reveal differentiated levels of protection among youth according to biographical and social characteristics.

Equivalent proportions of men and women (70%) state that they used some form of contraception or protection during their first relation. Condoms were the method used by the majority. Use of and access to contraceptive methods depended directly upon the organization of available health services in the cities where the youths live. Differences

thus appear among the three cities where our research took place, confirming results from earlier studies (Benfam, 1997). Protection among women is higher in Porto Alegre (80%) than in Salvador (63%), for example. Young women from Rio de Janeiro were at an intermediary position, with 71% using some form of protection during their first sexual relation. There are also clear differences between levels of protection according to distinct social environments. 60% of the men and women whose mothers did not attend school (or whose families have a very low income) used protection in comparison with more than 80% among those youths whose mothers attended university (or whose families have a high income level). These results corroborate the general trend we found regarding individual levels of instruction: the degree of protection during the first sexual relation varies from 54% among women with lower educational levels (incomplete basic education) to 84% among those who attended university.

Whether the first sexual relation took place with a *boyfriend* or (*girlfriend*) or with an occasional partner had no effect on the levels of protection. However, contraceptive use varies according to the age at which the first relation took place, with 52% of the women who had an early initiation using protection as compared to 80% of those women who had a late initiation. The same pattern was observed among men.

The proportions of interviewees who talked to their partners about how to prevent pregnancy before the first relation also varied according to sex, with 41% of men and 62% of women discussing protection with their partners prior to their first sexual relation. This gender difference was found in all three cities, leading us to affirm that men show a certain reticence or a lesser interest than women in talking to their partners about the consequences of the sexual act. This seems to be part of the construction of masculinity itself. There also seems to be a greater female capacity to engage in such conversations, which may be an ability connected to the relational construction of female identity (Heilborn, 1998).

Individuals' early or late entry into loving relationships (their age at the time of their first *steady relationship*) or sex (their age at the time of their first sexual relation) is an important factor in the level of communication between partners for both men and women. The level of conversation between partners increases the longer sexual initiation is delayed. The partner's relational status also plays a crucial role in communication (or lack thereof) regarding contraception: 61% of men and nearly the same proportion of women say they talked to their partner when this person was a *boyfriend* (or *girlfriend*). Meanwhile, only 26% of men and 43% of women claimed they discussed protection with occasional partners.

Talking about contraception and taking effective precautions at the time of the first relation are two relatively independent things. Protection is used during the first sexual relation in around 70% of cases. With regards to these cases, the overwhelming majority of interviewees stated that they had talked about contraception and had

used it with their partners during their sexual initiation. This applies both to men and women (85% versus 83%). However, not having talked about contraception does not necessarily imply a lack of protection during the first time: 56% of men and 47% of women who had not talked to their partners used contraception during their first sexual relation. The gender difference here leads us to assume that “talking before doing” is less necessary for men than for women. On the one hand, this difference could be based on male expectations that women take the necessary measures for protection; on the other, a certain male predisposition for condom use without previous negotiation may also be at play. That interpretive possibility is supported by the fact that AIDS prevention campaigns have been relatively successful in Brazil, especially among young people. This conduct is not maintained in subsequent sexual relations, however. Qualitative studies have shown that as soon as the relationship gains a relative degree of stability (referred to by youths as “trust”), condoms are abandoned without another contraceptive method necessarily being adopted (Monteiro, 2002).

The lack of contraceptive use in the first relation (31%) is largely justified by the argument that the partners “*didn't even think of it*” (70% of the non-protected women said this and 74% of men). This is similar to what these people stated with regard to their expectations regarding their first sexual relation, namely, that they “*didn't think about it much*”. Both justifications are characterized by a “spontaneous” tone, which strikes these informants as “adequate” when talking about sexuality. This cultural feature is not exclusive to the sphere of sexuality, but is also present in other parts of social life, such as the lack of detailed planning of leisure activities. The spontaneous representation of sexuality is linked to the gender system, which assigns very specific (traditional) roles to each of the sexes. It is a socially imagined representation in which women “should not think”, nor plan, for sexual relations and, consequently, for contraception. Men, on the other hand, value dialog concerning sexuality less than women, seeking to have sexual relations as soon as possible (Bozon, Heilborn, 2001). In a context in which female sexual initiation takes place earlier, such a system of relations may lead to a greater number of pregnancies that are unplanned, but not unacknowledged (Bajos & Ferrand, 2002).

The reproductive experience during “adolescence”

From the point of view of common sense, adolescent pregnancy is regarded as a social problem in Brazil. It is not a new phenomenon in Brazilian society, although in the past few years there has been a small increase in the number of pregnancies among women up to 20 years old. The magnitude of the social mobilization around this so-called problem is related to changes in social conceptions of age and gender that have generated expectations regarding “proper” youth trajectories: namely, that youths attain higher educational levels and delay reproduction. The phenomenon is in part a result of the rapid Brazilian demographic transition (Berquó, 1998). Earlier pregnancy is not equally present in all social strata, but is concentrated among women with lower

educational levels who come from families with low levels of cultural and financial capital. Becoming a mother is a social achievement many young women aspire to (Costa, 2002; Leal & Fachel, 1999). However, in contrast with the common sense expectation that adolescent pregnancy is a problem caused by poverty, we find that it is also present among higher social segments that have access to information, contraceptive methods and even safe (though illegal) abortions.

The profiles that emerge from the Gravada study show that 21.4% of men and 29.5% of women over 20 claimed to have had their first experience with pregnancy before that age. If we adopt 18 (the Brazilian age of majority) as a cut-off point, however, we find that these proportions are much lower: 8.9% among men and 16.6% among women. Pregnancy before age 15 is uncommon: 0.6% among young men and 1.6% among young women (Aquino et al., 2003). These pregnancies generally took place within established affective relationships. The percentage of interviewees whose first episode of pregnancy before the age of 20 took place with an occasional partner was small. These results demystify the idea often disseminated by popular media that adolescent pregnancy is due to sexual permissiveness among Brazilian youth.

Final considerations

Sexual initiation is a transition in the life course that is experienced differently by men and women. For men, it corresponds to a cultural imperative to prove their virility as soon as possible. The partner need not be someone with whom the young man has an affective relationship. Male sexual initiation thus is a social obligation that takes on the quality of “technical” learning for the actors and does not imply a commitment by men to their partners (Heilborn, 1998). To women, on the other hand, sexual initiation is integrated into a slower process which involves constructing the woman’s first stable (or conjugal) relationship. The main proof of femininity during adolescence is a young woman’s capacity to establish a stable relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The chosen partner’s attributes are very important. In comparison with preceding generations, women’s sexual initiation may now take place earlier within a *steady relationship*. Women’s relational perspective thus continues to be clearly different from the individualist perspective that is dominant among men (Duarte, 1986; Heilborn, 2004).

Permanence and change are contingencies of social life. The sexual trajectories of young Brazilians, here exemplified by the inhabitants of three cities with distinct cultural and social profiles in a very heterogeneous country of continental dimensions, highlight the intricate relationship between gender and sexuality. The picture presented above points to changes concerning female virginity, but also reveals the persistence of a traditional categorization of female gender, which is expressed in the expectation that women should construct a conjugal bond. If new forms of amorous interaction between young people appear on the scene, such as *hooking up*, this does not represent a profound change in the gender relations system that organizes the exercise of sexuality in Brazil.

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