



# Does Spousal Perspectives Lead Communication toward Family Planning Use? Evidence from Young Married Couples in Central India

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*Several studies have documented lack of spousal communication on fertility preferences is one of the factors constraining the use of family planning. Research carried out in the past suggests that the husband's approval of and discussion about family planning are important predictors of a woman's contraceptive use and fertility desires. This increased awareness of male role has resulted in effort to collect data on fertility attitudes and preferences from young married couples. A parallel data was collected from 418 young married couples from Ratlam district of Madhya Pradesh. About four-year difference in education is found between spouses, with husband having completed an average of 6.6 years and wife 2.9 years of schooling. Wife has been married 17 years, on average and has 2 births. The findings reveal that the inter-spouse communication on reproductive matters is slightly higher among those couples with some level of education, in case where larger age gap between the spouses and where only wives are economically active. Further, the contraceptive use and adoption of small family norm is also high in cases where inter-spouse communication prevails. It may further on emphasize that among various source of information on family planning, inter-spouse communication stands out in terms of reach of the message. The findings further suggest that husband-wife communication also help in reducing unmet need for family planning. Although the desire for additional child(ren) is slightly higher among husbands in both the group (i.e. those who discussed and those who did not). Nevertheless, the desire for additional child(ren) is less among those who communicated as compared to who did not. Based on the present analysis it may be informed that in order to enhance family planning use as well as bringing down the unmet need, inter-spousal communication may be promoted as strategically.*

**Keyword : Family Planing**

## Introduction

Spousal communication is an important step towards increasing men's participation in reproductive health (Becker, 1996; Biddlecom and Fapohunda, 1998; Lasee and Becker, 1997; Odhiambo, 1997). Given that men, as well as women, play key roles in reproductive health, communication is essential for making responsible and healthy decisions. The role of husband-wife communication in the adoption of contraceptive methods has been well-documented (Mukherjee, 1975; Beckman, 1983; Lasee and Becker, 1997; Sharan and Valente, 2002). The successful practice of contraception to a great extent depends upon the spousal communication concerning fertility desires and contraceptive choices. The occurrence of couple's discussion is positively associated with contraceptive use in general, and method choice and effectiveness in particular (Bean et al., 1983; Ullah and Chakraborty, 1993).

Studies like demographic health survey (DHS) which interviewed couples about fertility and family planning offer insight into the extent of their communication on these topics (Coombs and Fernandez, 1978; Blanc, et al., 1996; Ezeh, et al., 1996; Evaluation project, 1997). Apart from this, surveys alone cannot determine to what extent communication between partners promotes contraceptive use and to what extent the use of contraception leads to spousal communication (Beckman, 1983; Lasee and Becker, 1997; Salway, 1994). An appraisal of research over the past four decades time and again reveals that men and women who discuss family planning are more likely to use contraception, to use it effectively, and to have fewer children (Mitchell, 1972; Jolly, 1976; Beckman, 1983; De Silva, 1994; Lasee and Becker, 1997). On the contrary, when men and women do not know their partners' fertility desires, attitudes about

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family planning, or contraceptive preferences, the outcome can be unintended pregnancies, transmission of sexually transmitted infections, and unsafe abortions (McGinn, et al., 1989; Salway, 1994; Biddlecom and Fapohunda, 1998).

Communication enables husbands and wives to discern each other's attitudes toward fertility behavior and contraceptive use. It allows them to voice their concerns about reproductive health issues such as worries about unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Similarly, inter-spousal communication also can promote shared decision-making and more equitable gender roles (Stycos, 1996).

Among couples who discussed family planning, husbands and wives reported similar frequencies of discussion (De Rose, et al., 2004) and most discussed it more than twice within the past year. Couples in East Africa were most likely to report frequent discussions, with men reporting more frequent discussions than women compared to the couples in Mali, Niger, and Pakistan which reported the lowest frequencies of discussion (Ezeh, et al., 2001). Studies in other areas also noted that spousal communication on family planning is rather rare (McGinn, et al., 1989; Pineda, et al., 1995). Qualitative studies in the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan revealed that married couples rarely talk about matters connected to sex or reproductive health. In focus-group discussions, men and women expressed embarrassment to talk about these subjects. The majority of men said that they leave family planning decisions to their wives, but they expect their wives to take prior approval to use contraception. Most often they do not reject the wife's choice of method (Storey, et al., 1997).

Several studies have suggested that spousal communication about family planning usually begins only after the birth of one or two children (De Silva, 1994; Blanc, et al., 1996; Blanc, 2001). Couples in the developing world rarely discuss about fertility and family planning. Spousal communication concerning contraception, especially in developing countries, remains rare (Becker, 1996). Traditional male dominance in countries such as India, Kenya, and Nigeria is a major obstacle to spousal communication on family planning. Married women may feel discouraged to talk about contraception and men may feel there is no need to discuss or care about their wives' feelings and opinion (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Evaluation Project, 1997; Odhiambo, 1997). Studies in India also show that, couple communication on family planning though less frequent was significantly related to favorable attitudes to family planning (Reddy, 1993; Mukherjee, 1975). Saha and Bairagi (2007) suggested in their study that addressing the needs of the husbands as well as the wives is crucial to achieve optimal results in the family planning programs.

Couples exposed to mass media are able to overcome the stigma associated with discussion of reproductive matters in the conservative societies and in turn this exposure to mass media helps in increasing the level of communication among couples (Visaria, 1996). Since perception and attitude of the couples can be influenced by IEC, efforts should be made to expose women to reproductive matters that can influence fertility and contraceptive use (Sathar, et al., 2001).

Salway (1994) pointed out that in developing countries; research has shown that a wife's perception of her husband's attitude was a significant predictor of contraceptive practice. Men's involvement in family planning programs in fact help couples to obtain more information on contraceptive methods, to initiate discussion on family planning matters, to support their wives in family planning use, to take the responsibility themselves in contraception use, and to control fertility etc. (Lasee and Becker, 1997). A study in India by Raju (1987) found out that husbands were the principal decision-makers and initiators of discussions about family planning use. Husband's disagreement to contraception may be enough to block use in many cases and on the contrary, the wife's opposition to preventing use if the husband is favorably inclined, will occur less often. Casterline, et al. (1997) concluded, "This asymmetry means that when spouses disagree, women's family planning ambitions will more often be frustrated than men's".

Current use of family planning is significantly associated with knowledge and approval of family planning, husband-wife communication, desire for more children and ideal family size (Lasee and Becker, 1997). Though approval of family planning varies from country to country, both females and males usually support

family planning (Becker, 1996; Khalifa, 1988). Some studies have shown that the husband's approval of family planning and fertility preferences plays an important role in the couple's reproductive behavior. An Indonesian study showed that the husband's approval of family planning was the most significant determinant of contraceptive use (Joesoef, et al., 1988).

Most of the research based on males shows that men have more knowledge regarding all type of family planning methods as compared to females (Adewuyi and Ogunjuyigbe 2003; Ezeh et al., 1996; Were and Karanja 1994). A study of males in Uttar Pradesh of India (Singh et al., 1998) found that the husband's views concerning the role of their wives indicate a low level of communication in the various reproductive health matters. Acharya and Surender (1996) point out that even after controlling for other factors like age, education and religion, contraceptive use was highly sensitive to effective husband-wife communication. Other researchers have suggested that education or employment leads to fertility control, because they give women greater freedom to communicate with their spouses or equality within their domestic situations than uneducated or unemployed women (Jejeebhoy and Kulkarni, 1989; Malhotra et. al., 1995; Jejeebhoy, 2002).

The present paper is an attempt to examine the levels of husband-wife communication towards reproductive behaviour. It is important to state here that the present analysis is based on the responses given by both the wives and the husbands. The main objective of this study is to assess the extent of communication on matters related to reproductive behaviour in the contexts of socio-economic and demographic characteristics of both the spouses.

## **Data and Methodology**

A total of 418 couples (wives aged between 15 - 30 years and their husbands) were interviewed successfully from 25 rural and 12 urban Primary Sample Units (PSUs) in the study area of Ratlam District, Madhya Pradesh, India. The sampling unit in the present study was adopted from the District Level Household Survey under Reproductive and Child Health Project (DLHS), Phase-II, Round-II sampling frame, conducted in Ratlam district in 2004. According to the DLHS there were 1088 eligible couples of which women age 15-44 years to be interviewed from 1051 households. As the present study is focused on the couples of younger age, i.e, the women of age group 15-30 years , it is found that over all 670 couples were available in the DLHS sampling frame for the present study.

The study explored similar information using individual questionnaire from both husband and wife. Therefore, to minimize the chances of biasness in reporting, the emphasis has given for interviewing both the spouses simultaneously. Of the 418 couples, 57 percent were interviewed simultaneously (same day and same time), 29 percent were interviewed same day but different time and 13 percent of the couples where husbands interviewed after completing the interviews of their wives. Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Findings are represented in the form of bivarivate, multivariate tables. Binary logistic regression analysis was carried out to understand the effect of crucial independent variables on the dependent variables for use of family planning methods.

## **Results**

According to Table-1, 73 percent of couples were interviewed from rural areas. Almost all (96 percent) of the couples were Hindus and 26 percent belong to scheduled tribes in the study area. The median age of wives was 24 years and their husbands were 27 years at the time of the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the wives were married below the legal age at marriage. Among 47 percent of couples, the age gap between the spouses is up to two years. The age gap between the spouses is more in urban areas compared to rural areas. In terms of marital duration, 35 percent of couples have been married for less than five years while 25 percent of couples have been married for more than 10 years. Nearly one-fifth of couples are illiterate in study area. Twenty-two percent of couples have no living children while 56 percent of couples have one or

two living children followed by 23 percent of couples with three or more living children. The gap between mean children ever born and mean children surviving is more among couples residing in rural areas.

**Table 1:**  
**Percent distribution of couples according to selected background characteristics**

<b>Demographic indicators</b>	<b>% (N)</b>	<b>Demographic indicators</b>	<b>% (N)</b>
<b>Type of residence</b>		<b>Education</b>	
Rural	72.7 (304)	Both illiterate	19.1 (80)
Urban	27.3 (114)	Only wife literate	2.2 (9)
<b>Religion</b>		Only husbands	39.0 (163)
Hindu	95.5 (399)	literate	39.7 (166)
Other	4.5 (19)	Both literate	0 (418)
<b>Ethnicity</b>		<i>Median year of education (wives)</i>	7 (418)
Scheduled caste (SC)	6.5 (27)	<i>Median year of education (husbands)</i>	8.4 (35)
Schedules tribe (ST)	26.1 (109)		1.0 (4)
Other backward classes	40.7 (170)	<b>Work status</b>	42.1 (176)
General (higher caste)	26.8 (112)	Both not working	48.6 (203)
<b>Median age in years</b>	27 (418)	Only wife working	
Wife		Only husband	23.2 (97)
Husband	47.1 (197)	working	4.8 (20)
<b>Age gap between husband &amp; wife</b>	30.1 (126)	Both working	26.1 (109)
Same age or age gap up to 2 years	22.7 (95)	<b>Exposure to media</b>	45.9 (192)
3-4 years		Both not exposed	
5 or more years	34.9 (146)	Only wife exposed	21.1 (88)
<b>Marital duration</b>		Only husband	22.7 (95)
Less than 5 years	21.5 (90)	exposed	21.5 (90)
5-10 years	56.0 (234)	Both exposed	17.9 (75)
11 years or more	22.5 (94)	<b>Wealth Quintiles</b>	16.7 (70)
<b>Number of living children</b>	1.8 (418)	Lowest	
None	1.6 (418)	Second	<b>100.0 (418)</b>
1-2		Middle	
3 or more		Fourth	
<i>Mean children ever born</i>		Highest	
<i>Mean number of living children</i>		<b>Total percent</b>	

In terms of spousal educational status, 58 percent of wives and 21 percent of husbands are illiterate. The median year of education is 0 among wives and 7 among husbands. However, the median year of education among the literate wives is 6, which is more among urban wives (8 years) than rural wives (5 years). In terms of work status of couples, nearly 50 percent of couples were currently working (dominated by agricultural sector). Forty-six percent of couples were exposed to any mass media and among 26 percent

of couples where only husbands were exposed to any mass media. Wealth index is calculated on the basis of household amenities and assets and divided into each 20 percent quintiles called standard of living quintiles. Twenty-one percent of couples belong to the lowest wealth quintile and 17 percent of couples belong to the highest quintile in study areas. None of the household lies in lowest quintile in urban areas whereas 28 percent of households fall in lowest quintile in rural areas.

## Discussion about Family Planning

Couples were also asked regarding the discussion of family planning methods and the frequency of discussion in the last one year prior to the survey. The results are presented in Table 2. It is observed that 39 percent of the wives and 37 percent of husbands reported that they had discussed matters related to family planning with their spouses in the last one year. The percentages of respondents reported discussion with the spouse on family planning methods in the last one year was higher in the urban areas (50 percent of husbands and 52 percent of wives) compared to couples residing in the rural areas (32 percent of husbands and 34 percent of wives).

**Table 2:**

**Percent Distribution of Couples who Discussed about Family Planning in Past One Year According to Place of Residence**

Level of discussion on family planing	Wife			Husband		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
<b>Discussed in past one year</b>						
Yes	34.2	51.8	39.0	31.6	50.0	36.6
No	65.8	48.2	61.0	68.4	50.0	63.4
<b>Number</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>418</b>
<b>Frequency of discussion</b>						
Rarely (1-2 times)	40.4	33.9	38.0	38.5	22.8	32.7
Frequently (3 or more times)	59.6	66.1	62.0	61.5	77.2	67.3
<b>Initiator of discussion</b>						
Wife	47.1	42.4	45.4	69.8	70.2	69.9
Husband	52.9	57.6	54.6	30.2	29.8	30.1
<b>Time when start discussing</b>						
Immediately after marriage	21.2	55.9	33.7	33.3	52.6	40.5
After 1st child	29.8	20.3	26.4	27.1	26.3	26.8
After 2nd children	32.7	16.9	27.0	31.3	19.3	26.8
After 3 or more children	16.3	6.8	12.9	8.3	1.8	5.9
<b>Number</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>153</b>

Couples, who had discussed family planning methods with their spouses, were also asked about the frequency of discussion. It is found that majority of the couples had discussed it with the spouse for '3 or more times'. Thirty-eight percent of wives and 33 percent of husbands reported to have rarely discuss family planning (one or two times) with the spouse in the last one year. It is very interesting to note that 70 percent of husbands reported that their wives initiated the discussion on family planning. Again, 45 percent of wives reported that their husbands were the ones who initiated the discussion(s). Furthermore, the couples who had discussed family planning methods in last one year were asked about when they started discussion. It is found that majority of husbands (41 percent) and wives (34 percent) had discussed it immediately after marriage. More than one-fourth of the couples reported that they discussed the use of family planning after having their first or second child.

## Differentials by Awareness, Approval of and Discussion about Family Planning

Involvement of men in family planning is now a topic for discussion that draws a lot of comments. Table 3 shows that the use of family planning methods was found more among the couples who were aware of family planning methods. Of the couples who were aware about all five modern methods of family planning, 63 percent of them were using any method of family planning. The percentage of use was lower among couples where only husbands (52 percent) knew all the modern family planning methods as compared to the couples where only wives knew (61 percent) all the modern methods. Exposure to family planning messages through the media has a positive influence among couples towards use of family planning. Of the couples who were exposed to family planning messages in last three months, 58 percent of them were currently using family planning method as compared to only 36 percent of couples who were not exposed.

Couples approval of family planning found to be the most crucial aspect in the current use of family planning methods. It is found that couples were more likely to use any contraceptive methods when both the spouses approve of family planning (55 percent) as compared to approval by either the husband (21 percent) or by the wife (27 percent).

**Table 3:**

### Percent Distribution of Couples by Current use of Family Planning According to Awareness, Approval of and Discussion about Family Planning

Awareness, approval and discussion about family planning	Current user	None user	Number
<b>Aware of any modern spacing method</b>			
Both	52.3	47.7	327
Only wife	52.0	48.0	25
Only husband	25.9	74.1	54
None	0.0	100.0	12
<b>Aware of all modern method</b>			
Both	62.9	37.1	140
Only wife	60.9	39.1	64
Only husband	52.4	47.6	42
None	28.5	71.5	172
<b>Exposure to FP messages in last 3 months</b>			
Both	57.5	42.5	127
Only wife	52.4	47.6	63
Only husband	48.7	51.3	76
None	36.2	63.8	152
<b>Approval of family planning</b>			
Both approve	54.7	45.3	329
Only wife approve	26.5	73.5	34
Only husband approve	20.5	79.5	39
Both disapprove/can't say	6.3	93.8	16
<b>Discussion about family planning</b>			
Both discussed	68.9	31.1	106
Only wife report	63.2	36.8	57
Only husband report	42.6	57.4	47
Both did not discuss	33.2	66.8	208
<b>Total</b>	<b>47.4</b>	<b>52.6</b>	<b>418</b>

*Note: All Modern family planning methods include: female sterilization, male sterilization, IUD, oral contraceptive pill and condom and any spacing method includes: IUD, oral contraceptive pill or condom.*



A negligible proportion of couples were using family planning method where both the spouses disapproved or could not say regarding approval of family planning.

Discussion about family planning methods among couples is also found to be an important factor in determining contraceptive use. It is found from Table 3 that of the couples who reported joint discussion on family planning methods, 69 percent of them were using family planning methods as compared to only 33 percent of couples who did not discuss in last one year. However, among the couples where only the wife reported discussion, 63 percent of them were currently using methods as compared to 43 percent of couples where only the husbands reported discussion.

## **Determinants of Discussion about Family Planning**

The for the other variables. It is found that the strong role played by perceptions towards family planning discussion is evident after controlling the other socio-economic covariates.

The odds ratio of discussion about family planning was positively associated with the ideal family size of two or fewer children, even after controlling other in both the models. Couples who had discussed about family planning in the last one year were significantly 2.6 times more likely to report ideal family size two or fewer children as compared to couples who did not. When controlling the covariates in Model-1, couples who discussed family size, 2.5 times significantly more likely to report an ideal family size of two or fewer children. However, in Model-2, couples who discussed family planning, 1.9 times significantly more likely to report an ideal family size two or fewer children even also controlling education and family planning exposure covariates. Couples who discussed family planning were more likely to prefer an ideal sex composition of one son and one daughter (unadjusted Odd Ratio = 1.9;  $p < 0.05$ ) than the couples who did not. Model-1 shows a significant positive association between discussion about family planning and ideal sex composition of children even after controlling the other covariates (adjusted Odd Ratio = 2.0;  $p < 0.05$ ).

Family planning knowledge is positively associated with discussion about matters related to family planning. Continuing from Table 4, couples who discussed about family planning in past one year were significantly more likely to have knowledge of all five modern family planning methods (unadjusted Odd Ratio = 3.0,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, after controlling the socio-economic characteristics a similar pattern exists in both the models addressing the strong impact of discussion on family planning behavior. For instance, even after controlling education and exposure to family planning messages in Model-2, couples having knowledge of all the modern methods were 2.5 times more as compared to couples who had not discussed family planning in past one year. Approval of family planning by both the spouses was positively associated with discussion even after controlling the socio-economic and demographic characteristics in both the models. Couples, who discussed family planning 3.8 times significantly more likely to approve of family planning in Model-1. When controlling the education and family planning exposure along with other covariates in Model-2, couples who discussed family planning were, 3.5 times significantly more likely to approve of family planning which was also found in Model-3 (OR 2.9;  $p < 0.05$ ) even after controlling the effect of opinion indices. The current use of family planning method was positively influenced by inter-spousal discussion towards family planning (unadjusted Odd Ratio = 3.3,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the level of association remains same even after controlling the other covariates in Model-1. Controlling the education and exposure to family planning messages along with other covariates in Model-2, the discussion remains significantly in positive direction with current use of family planning (adjusted Odd Ratio = 2.8,  $p < 0.05$ ). Future use of family planning was also positively influenced with inter-spousal discussion. Couples who discussed about family planning in past one year, were more intended to use family planning in future (unadjusted Odd Ratio = 6.5,  $p < 0.01$ ). When controlling the socio-economic and demographic covariates in Model-1 and controlling the education and exposure to family planning messages along with other covariates in Model-2, the effect remain statistically significant in positive direction (adjusted Odd Ratio = 4.1,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Conclusion

Findings of the study reveal that communication between spouses had some effect on fertility desires and contraceptive use and this effect differs by socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the couples. The findings address the inter-spousal communication about reproductive matters was higher among those couples with some level of education, where only wives were economically better off and exposed to family planning messages.

**Table 4:**  
**Odds Ratios for Associations of DISCUSSION<sup>B</sup> ABOUT FAMILY PLANNING in Past one Year and Reproductive Behavior, Controlling for Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors**

Response indicator (dependent variable)	unadjusted odds ratio	Model-1 <sup>1</sup>	Model-2 <sup>2</sup>	Number of couples
<b>Desired ideal children (up to 2)<sup>B</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	418
Yes	2.58***	2.50***	1.88*	
<b>Sex composition as one son and one daughter of desired ideal children<sup>B</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	345
Yes	1.87**	1.95**	1.49	
<b>Desire for additional child<sup>B</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	418
Yes	0.38***	0.69	0.71	
<b>Preferred sex as son<sup>B</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	220
Yes	0.85	1.12	1.23	
<b>Knowledge of all 5 modern family planning methods<sup>E</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	418
Yes	3.01***	2.60**	2.50**	
<b>Approval of family planning<sup>B</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	418
Yes	4.57***	3.79***	3.45**	
<b>Current use of family planning<sup>E</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	418
Yes	3.31***	2.99***	2.82**	
<b>Future use of family planning<sup>E</sup></b>				
No <sup>R</sup>	1.00	1.00	1.00	220
Yes	6.54***	6.33**	3.38**	

Note: <sup>1</sup>Covariates includes place of residence, religion, ethnicity, age gap between spouses, duration of marriage, sex of living children, occupation, wealth index, timing of interviewed of couples.

<sup>2</sup>Covariates includes place of residence, religion, ethnicity, age gap between spouses, duration of marriage, sex of living children, occupation, wealth index, timing of interviewed of couples, education, and exposure to media.

<sup>B</sup>Both the spouses; <sup>E</sup>Either wife or husband.

Five modern methods: Pill, condom, IUD, female and male sterilization.

Level of significance: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$

Results from the multivariate analysis indicated that inter-spousal discussion on family planning has a significant impact on reproductive outcomes even after controlling the socio-economic and demographic



characteristics in different Models. Education of the couples played a significant role in the discussion on family planning between the spouses followed by family planning exposure and opinion towards inter-spousal discussion on number of children and family planning. Besides fertility indicators, inter-spousal discussion has greater effect on family planning indicators viz. approval, current and future use of family planning.

Further, the contraceptive use and adoption of small family norm is also high in cases where inter-spouse communication prevails. It may further on emphasized that among various source of information on family planning, inter-spouse communication stands out in terms of reach of the message. The findings further suggest that husband-wife communication also help in reducing unmet need for family planning. Although the desire for additional child(ren) is slightly higher among husbands in both the group (i.e. those who discussed and those who did not). Nevertheless, the desire for additional child(ren) is less among those who communicated as compared to who did not.

Therefore, the findings indicate that inter-spousal communication can be a significant factor to control the fertility among the young married couples through enhancing the education and motivation towards small family norms. Based on the present analysis it may be informed that in order to enhance family planning use as well as bringing down the unmet need, inter-spousal communication may be promoted as strategically.

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