

REVIEW

Service Failure, Threat or Opportunity to Engage a Research Shopper?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the effect of the existence or not of failures, as well as the response of retailers to an eventual failure, influences the emotions developed by research shoppers. The empirical research is based on a survey with a sample of 636 mobile phone users. The results derived from the application of a structural equations model indicate that research shoppers develop more intense positive emotions when they do not have any complain with the retailers or if they solved the failure satisfactorily. Likewise, the relationship between research shoppers and the development of negative emotions is less intense when customers do not have any complain with the retailer or the company has solved the failure satisfactorily.

1. Introduction

Customer journey is more omni-channel than ever. Studies on nowadays consumption habits indicated that customers combine physical and virtual channels in all the stages of the purchase process, building their own customer journey^[1,2]. In this sense, 75% customers in the world are omni-shoppers^[3]. The rapid adoption and use of offline and online channels by individuals respond to the fact that they take advantage of each of these channels to choose the option that maximizes their benefits. These benefits include choosing the product and brand that meet the customers' needs, or choosing the retailer in which to make the purchase with the best value for money.

While academic and professional language refers to

an omni-shopper associating to an individual who uses multiple touchpoints offline and online during the customer journey, the combination of more recurrent channels during the decision-making process involves the Internet and the physical store^[4]. In this sense, the "research shopping" stands out and reflects, with a high degree of accuracy, the shopping behaviors of current customers, and it is defined as "the propensity of customers to research the product in one channel (e.g., the Internet), and then purchase it through another channel (e.g., the store)"^[5]. The customer defined as research shopper uses a channel more intensively (whether offline or online) in the information search stage, and chooses an alternative one to acquire the product^[5].

The literature review has focused on how customers who develop any omni-channel behavior are more profit-

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able for retailers^[8]. However, this customer is demanding and seeks for a holistic or seamless experience in all the channels through which he/she interacts with the retailer^[9]. In this way, the success of companies lies in being able to generate unique, positive and differentiating emotions to their customers at all touchpoints. Thus, customers will perceive the brand as their own, and thus develop higher levels of satisfaction and engagement with the retailer^[10, 11]. This means that buyers are its biggest “fans” and an increase in its lifetime value^[12]. On the other hand, if the retailer generates negative emotions, customers will increase their propensity to complain and share the experience through negative word-of-mouth –WOM–^[13] or even to leave the relationship^[14].

From both an academic and professional point of view, there is a special interest in knowing what benefits the emotions and experiences lived by customers during their decision-making process can bring to retailers^[15]. According to^[16], shoppers’ the functional and emotional experience represents the “thread” that connects with the perceived value of the organization, the satisfaction obtained and, as a consequence, the engagement that the customer can develop. Therefore, the emotional experience can be considered an antecedent of the value (economic and relational) that a shopper can have for a retailer.

For this reason, we consider relevant to analyze the effect of research shopping on emotions, insofar as the generation of experiences and emotions represents one of the basic strategies of today’s retailers^[17]. It is also interesting to know how the relationship between retailer and customer will be affected by the existence of a service failure and whether the retailer has been able to solve it or not, since faults are in many cases inevitable and can lead to a decrease in sales and the rupture of this relationship^[18].

This study is structured into five sections. First, we describe the theoretical framework of the research and present the hypotheses. Second, we explain the empirical study conducted for the contrast of the hypotheses previously put forward. Third, we present the main results. Fourth, we present the conclusions and implications for management. Finally, we address the main limitations of our study and proposes future lines of research.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

2.1. Moderating Effect of Research Shopping on the Emotions

Emotions within retail environments are conceptualized as the set of emotional responses that occur during the information search and purchase stages, and also during the consumption of a product/brand, in a website and/or phys-

ical store^[19]. Among the different theories for measuring emotions, the two-dimensional approach (positive emotions and negative emotions) of^[20] is one of the most influential theory. According to the Law of Hedonic Asymmetry proposed by^[21], a customer’s positive emotions throughout the shopping journey tend to disappear more quickly than negative emotions. While when a strong link is established between the retailer and the customer, this law acts in reverse. That is, those companies that provide unique and differentiating experiences will activate customer’s positive emotions. Consequently, the “pleasure” dimension will also be enhanced, and the overall customer experience with the company will be even more satisfying^[22].

In general terms, research shopping behavior is likely to enhance the emotions, both positive and negative, experienced during the shopping journey. This can be explained by using information processing theories, as combining offline and online touchpoints means changes in the way the customer searches for, evaluates and compares information.

The ELM Model (Elaboration Likelihood Model) proposed by^[23] is one of the most relevant theories for studying information processing. This model considers that information processing is a continuum, whose extremes are formed by two intensity levels, high and low. This fact will lead to two possible ways by which individuals can process information, i.e. a central route and a peripheral route. Individuals who follow the central route are more motivated and involved in searching for information^[24]. They will examine more critically, deeply and rationally all the information related to the products. On the other hand, individuals who follow the peripheral route will pay less attention to the information or messages received, performing a more superficial information processing than in the previous case.

The combination of offline and online touchpoints by research shoppers, facilitates the adoption of the central route to search, obtain, compare and evaluate specific information about products, brands and/or retailers before purchasing. In comparison to one-stop shoppers (offline or online), research shoppers, develop a more rational and reflective behavior in which more information is handled and more time and efforts are invested.

This greater involvement inherent in research shopping behavior leads the shopper to receive a more complete and in-depth experience of his/her interactions with retailers. The principal attraction of the online channel, in addition to aspects such as price or convenience, is the fact that the customer can have an interactive conversation with the retailer. The latter actively listen to the customers

and involve them in their management, turning them into “prosumers”. On the other hand, in a research shopping, physical stores continue to be an important reference point within the decision-making process. The customer can inspect the product not only physically, but also in different scenarios provided by in-store technologies such as augmented reality, or as in the case of clothing stores, in the virtual fitting rooms. These innovative fitting rooms make easier for customers to see themselves with different colors and sizes of the same garment without the need to try it [9]. In addition, physical stores allow shoppers to interact with the sales force and receive personalized advice. In this way, it can be concluded that research shoppers are more likely to see their involvement with the retailer enhanced and, consequently, their positive and negative emotions can be reinforced and intensified.

2.2. Moderating Effect of Service Failures

The emotions experienced by a research shopper may be moderated by the result of his/her relationship with the retailer. Specifically, by the existence or not of service failures, as well as the response to an eventual failure. Attribution theories highlight that, in the event of a possible service failure, research shoppers attribute causes that may be (1) internal or personal –consumer failures–, and (2) external or situational –salesperson failures– [25], which in turn may give rise to emotions and influence with varying intensity depending on the profile of the customer [26].

In this sense, [27] revises the proposal made by [25] and analyses the service failures distinguishing three dimensions: (1) locus of control –who is the person responsible?–; (2) stability –is it likely to happen again?–; (3) control –does the person responsible have control over the cause?–. Specifically, some researches find significant relationships between the locus of control dimension and the satisfaction experienced. Thus, [28] observed that when service failures were attributed to the company, satisfaction was lower than when the consumers attributed them to themselves.

While the best thing is for companies to be able to prevent service failures [29], these are often unavoidable. Consequently, retailers should be able to deal with complaints from research shoppers [30], as the development of service recovery strategies may provide a new opportunity to correct mistakes and the possibility of providing a positive customer experience [29]. Conversely, if a research shopper attributes service failures to the company and perceives that these failures have not been properly solved or that the retailer has done nothing to solve them, the resulting experience is likely to be negative.

In line with the previous arguments, our research proposes that those cases in which either the service has been provided without faults, or possible failures have been satisfactorily solved, research shopping behavior will generate more intense positive emotions. On the other hand, more moderate negative emotions compared to the situation in which there have been failures, but these have not had a satisfactory solution. So, it is expected that:

H_{1a}: The positive relationship between research shopping and positive emotions is more intense in the case the service has been provided without failures or possible faults have been satisfactorily solved than when the consumer perceives that the failures have not been satisfactorily solved.

H_{1b}: The positive relationship between research shopping and negative emotions is less intense in the case the service has been provided without failures or possible faults have been satisfactorily solved than when the consumer perceives that the failures have not been satisfactorily solved.

Figure 1 shows the proposed theoretical model.

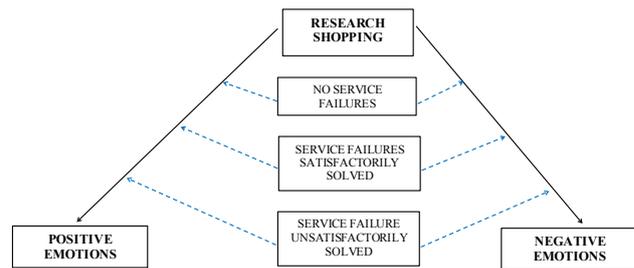


Figure 1. Research proposal

3. Research method

3.1. Research scope and sample design

To test the proposed hypotheses, we performed an empirical research choosing a sample of Spanish population over 15 years of age that has purchased a mobile phone during the past six months in a physical store or through the online channels. This ensures that respondents keep their shopping experience recent and therefore remember if there has been any service failure. The data was collected through a personal structured questionnaire. According to [31] and [32] this methodology allows the respondent to be asked directly about actual failure situations and whether or not the retailer has attempted to recover the service. In this way, asking for a real lived experience will generate answers that are not based on assumptions and that will allow to measure the effect that the service failure has on the relationship between customers and companies in terms of emotions.

The choice of the smartphone as a reference product for this empirical research focuses first and foremost on its high penetration rate (80%) in Spain^[33]. In addition, the smartphone can be considered an experience product^[34]. Customers cannot assess a priori whether the choice of one mobile phone over another (for example, Android vs iOS mobile operating systems) will provide them with greater utility, positive experiences or satisfaction. Thus, to try to avoid the risks associated with the purchase, regardless of the channel finally chosen for the acquire the smartphone, the customer will seek information through the online channel to know the opinion and experience of experts and other customers, and the physical store to test and inspect the mobile device and obtain an additional and professional opinion of the sales staff^[35]. Finally, the sector belonging to smartphone, consumer electronics, agrees with^[36], one of the sectors where research shopping behavior more developed, and is receives the highest number of complaints.

We conducted 667 questionnaires, obtaining 636 valid surveys. In order to obtain a representative sample, the proportions of men, women and ages resulting from the figures provided by the Spanish Statistics Institute were taken into account. The profile of the sample is detailed in Appendix 1.

3.2. Measurement of the Model Variables

The measurement of emotions was performed through a series of items obtained in the literature review on the subject. All the items were evaluated using a 11-point Likert scale in which 0 implied total disagreement and 10 total agreement with the statements proposed. The emotions have not been analyzed just at the moment they occurred, but a posteriori. The quick and ephemeral nature of emotions seems to suggest that the first option is more advisable. However, the high cost of this method and its intrusive consideration by individuals means that a posteriori measurement remains the most widespread technique. Studies as those conducted by^[37, 38, 39, 40] have demonstrated this fact, evidencing that emotions experienced during the use or consumption of products function as a selection system. Customers store in their memories and in a prolonged manner the facts that have special emotional meanings, which can be positive^[22] or negative^[21]. This way, these facts are more easily remembered. Appendix 2 shows the items used, the reliability and validity criteria, as well as their basic descriptions.

The service failure was measured by means of a dichotomous question. Respondents specified whether or not they had had complaints with the retailer where they

purchased their latest smartphone. In order to ascertain the companies' actions in the face of service failures, a second dichotomous question was asked in which customers indicated whether or not the distributors had assumed the service failure and how it had been solved (Appendix 2).

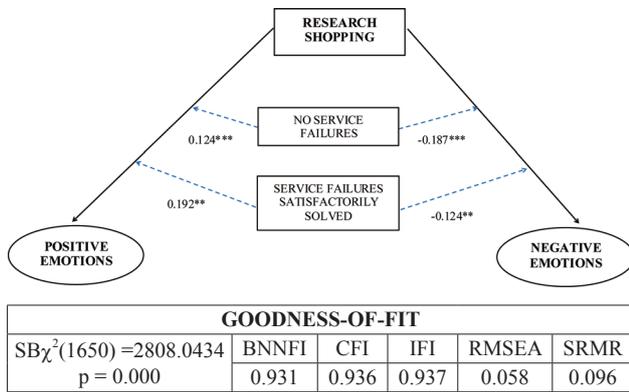
Finally, research shopping was measured through a 10-point scale, in which 1 referred to the use of a single channel (whether physical or virtual) and 10 referred to the combined use of offline and online channels to choose and buy the mobile phones. Specifically, 1 means: "I searched for information and purchased the mobile phone using just a single channel (physical store or the Internet)"; and 10 means: "I searched for information and purchased the mobile phone using multiple channels (physical store and the Internet)" (Appendix 2).

4. Results

To test the hypotheses, we performed a multigroup analysis using the EQS 6.2 software for Windows and the robust maximum likelihood method (ML Robust). There are three groups of respondents: customers who did not have any complaints with the retailer where they bought their smartphone (411 respondents), customers who said they had a complaint with the retailer and the company solved it satisfactorily (133 respondents) and those customers who had a complaint but the retailer did not solve in a satisfactory way (92 respondents).

The results show some support for hypothesis H_{1a}. Regarding the relationship between research shopping and the development of positive emotions, we observe that is more intense when customers have not had any complaints with the retailer. However, when shoppers have had some complaints with the distributor but the company has satisfactorily solved service failures, the results show a coefficient with the expected sign (positive) relative to positive emotions. As for the research shoppers that have had some service failure and their complaints have not been solved in a satisfactory way, the coefficient is negative but not significant.

Our findings also lead us to accept (partially) the hypothesis H_{1b}. When we observe the relationship between negative emotions and the existence or not of service failures, the measurement model (Figure 2) shows that research shoppers develop less intense negative emotions when they have not had complaints, or when retailers have solved them satisfactorily. On the other hand, regarding the development of negative emotions by research shoppers who have had a service failure and retailers have not resolved satisfactorily, the coefficient is positive but not significant.



Note: * p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.001

Figure 2. Measurement model

5. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

The goal of the present study was to determine whether there are no complaints between retailer and customer, or whether there is a service failure and it has been satisfactorily solved –or not– had a moderating effect on the intensity of the relationship between emotions and research shopping behavior.

The present research allowed us to reach different conclusions and some important managerial implications. First, the study shows that research shoppers who have had no complaints with the retailer develop more intense positive emotions. In this sense, companies who want to increase the satisfaction and engagement of nowadays customers –defined as research shoppers–, as well as their lifetime value will have to ensure that the shopping experience is truly holistic or seamless, generating positive emotions in the physical and virtual channels, and avoid, as far as possible, any service failure throughout the customer journey. Therefore, retailers should be aware that each channel has strengths and weaknesses in convenience, advice, the possibility of product inspection, contacts with sales staff, security, privacy, control of the purchasing process, economic cost, personal effort, time, means of payment, availability of the product... and, consequently, the service failure at the physical touchpoints need not be the same as at the virtual touchpoints.

The adaptation of the shopping experience in the offline and online channels involves knowing what elements are a ‘commodity’ for research shoppers that, although providing them will not enhance customer loyalty, if certain services are not offered will have a negative impact on the relationship between retailer and shoppers. Similarly, it will be necessary to know which elements represent a differentiating element for retailers to design strategies

that guarantee the development of unique shopping experiences for research shoppers, such as, for example, in-store technology^[9] or allow these customers to use the Apps of their smartphones to look for information about the company where it should try to show its competitive advantage over other distributors so that, in the event that customers have a greater propensity to buy over the Internet, they can purchase the products through their mobile devices in-store. Retailers must also meet promised delivery deadlines and have sufficient stock of the assortment advertised on the web for those customers who finally decide to buy online. According to^[41], these are two of the elements, in addition to price and convenience, that have the greatest boom among shoppers who perform showrooming. In other words, those individuals who are research shoppers (use of offline and online channels) end up buying over the Internet.

Second, the existence of service failures is in many cases unavoidable, although retailers can come out reinforced and turn customer complaints into a tool to achieve his/her loyalty. The complaints of any research shopper in his/her relationship with the distributor are legitimate and by themselves do not damage the image of the retailer. According to^[18], those customers who complain about service failures show greater retention. Thus, when a research shopper is dissatisfied with the company, the best option for retailers is for the shopper to express dissatisfaction. Although it is necessary to provide access to start the complaint process, both in the physical and virtual touchpoints.

Having a customer database that includes the date on which the research shopper makes the complaint, a description of the service failure and in which channel, offline or online, this failure has occurred, will help retailers give an adequate response to customers in the shortest possible time and, in addition, there will be barriers to positive change^[18]. These barriers imply strengthening the relationship between research shopper and distributor offering from economic benefits to engagement incentives, something that will result in the customer developing more intense positive emotions (reducing the development of negative emotions) that he will communicate to his closest environment (WOM), as well as to other shoppers through the social media available to him/her (e-WOM).

On the other hand, although the findings of our study do not show significant results, the coefficients seem to reflect that inadequate complaints treatment, and the lack of commitment of positive barriers to change on the part of the retailer, does imply a retailer’s bad reputation. The goal of any research shopper who has not seen his/her expectations met is for the retailer to know his/her dis-

satisfaction and take steps to repair the dissatisfaction ^[42]. Thus, research shoppers share their experience through the physical and virtual touchpoints available as a way to materialize a formal complaint and, on many occasions, especially if they do not see signs of resolution by the company, is used as an element to make effective their revenge with the cause of that bad experience negatively influencing the decision of other shoppers. Similarly, sharing a bad shopping experience seeks the consensus of other customers. Nowadays, thanks to social media, WOM and e-WOM spreads quickly and has a high impact. Therefore, there will be answers to support this discontent. If negative emotions are already more resistant to change, as proposed by the Law of Hedonic Asymmetry ^[21], reliving bad experiences and finding individuals who support these negative feelings will generate greater discontent in research shoppers ^[43], influencing in a negative and more pronounced way in their satisfaction and, consequently, to draw a negative brand image.

6. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

Among the most important limitations of this research is the fact that it is a cross-sectional study focused on a particular moment in time. On the other hand, the differences generated by the existence or not of services failures, as well as the response of retailers to a possible failure, have only been analyzed in the emotions experienced by research shoppers, with other cognitive-affective variables such as, for example, perceived value, satisfaction, trust or engagement that have not been considered. In addition,

the study focuses on a specific product, the smartphone, which being an experience product ^[34] recommends caution when extending or generalizing the results to other sectors and products.

Future research could be aimed at conducting a study including the cognitive-affective variables mentioned above. It would be especially interesting to differentiate the two dominant research shopping behaviors, webrooming (search for information online and purchase in physical store) and showrooming (search for information in physical store and purchase online). According to the characteristics that define webrooming (more linked to the central route of information processing) as opposed to showrooming (more associated with the peripheral route of information processing), there could be differences in the intensity that each of these types of research shopping presents on the emotions that customers develop when faced with a problem with the retailer. Webroomers present a more reflective purchasing behavior towards the showroomer. This customer uses the Internet as a marketing specialist and, consequently, goes to the physical store with specific knowledge about the product and brand he/she wants to buy. For its part, showroomers first go to the physical store to physically inspect the product and acquire the product online. In this sense, it is possible that showrooming customer does not have abundant and precise information on the characteristics about the products, presenting an attitude or opinion less consolidated than the webroomer. And, consequently, showroomers are more oriented to the search for efficiency or to obtain the best price.

Supplements

Appendix 1. Descriptive statistics

| | SAMPLE | RESEARCH SHOPPERS 261 (41.04%) | | | ONE-STOP SHOPPERS 375 (58.96%) | | |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | | No service failures | Service failures satisfactorily solved | Service failures unsatisfactorily solved | No service failures | Service failures satisfactorily solved | Service failures unsatisfactorily solved |
| | 636 (100.00%) | 150 (57.47%) | 66 (25.28%) | 45 (17.24%) | 261 (69.60%) | 67 (12.53%) | 47 (17.87%) |
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| Male | 300 (47.17%) | 129 (49.43%) | | | 171 (46.40%) | | |
| | | 71 (47.33%) | 36 (54.55%) | 22 (48.89%) | 121 (46.36%) | 22 (32.84%) | 28 (59.57%) |
| Female | 336 (52.83%) | 132 (50.57%) | | | 204 (53.60%) | | |
| | | 79 (52.67%) | 30 (45.45%) | 23 (51.11%) | 140 (53.64%) | 45 (67.16%) | 19 (40.43%) |
| Age | | | | | | | |
| 15-24 years | 81 (12.70%) | 50 (19.16%) | | | 31 (8.27%) | | |
| | | 27 (18.00%) | 13 (19.70%) | 10 (22.22%) | 19 (17.28%) | 5 (7.46%) | 7 (14.89%) |
| 25-44 years | 281 (44.20%) | 145 (55.56%) | | | 136 (36.27%) | | |
| | | 86 (57.33%) | 35 (53.03%) | 24 (53.33%) | 94 (36.02%) | 23 (34.33%) | 19 (40.43%) |
| 45-64 years | 169 (26.60%) | 50 (19.16%) | | | 119 (31.73%) | | |
| | | 26 (17.33%) | 14 (21.21%) | 10 (22.22%) | 75 (28.74%) | 25 (37.31%) | 19 (40.43%) |
| > 65 years | 105 (16.50%) | 16 (6.13%) | | | 89 (23.73%) | | |
| | | 11 (7.33%) | 4 (6.06%) | 1 (2.22%) | 73 (27.97%) | 14 (20.90%) | 2 (4.26%) |

Finally, future studies could be carried out in other consumer sectors where omni-channel strategy and, especially, research shopping behavior have a high degree of implantation, such as consumer electronics, fashion, sports equipment, toys, beauty and other goods/services in the luxury market ^[44, 45], or those who are predicted to have a good future, such as Fast Moving Consumer Goods-FMCG ^[46], in order to evaluate whether the variables studied present the same results.

Appendix 2. Reliability and validity

| EMOTIONS ^[47, 48] | | | |
|---|--------------------|------|------|
| POSITIVE EMOTIONS | | | |
| $\alpha = 0.959$; CR = 0.959; AVE = 0.824 | | | |
| <i>Referring to the experience during the shopping journey, say which one of these emotions reflects how you felt</i> | | | |
| Items | Loadings (t-value) | Mean | SD |
| Delighted | 0.929 (38.159) | 5.13 | 2.52 |
| Glad | 0.931 (36.275) | 5.45 | 2.49 |
| Happy | 0.947 (40.834) | 5.01 | 2.53 |
| Excited | 0.895 (35.838) | 5.41 | 2.70 |
| Pleased | 0.831 (30.814) | 5.43 | 2.64 |
| NEGATIVE EMOTIONS | | | |
| $\alpha = 0.935$; CR = 0.941; AVE = 0.765 | | | |
| Angry | 0.858 (25.527) | 2.97 | 2.48 |
| Angry | 0.958 (27.650) | 2.77 | 2.42 |
| Annoyed | 0.968 (29.757) | 2.78 | 2.43 |
| Distressed | 0.898 (23.080) | 2.58 | 2.35 |
| Bored | 0.654 (18.053) | 3.29 | 2.73 |

Notes: Participants responded using a 11-point Likert scale: 0 = completely disagree and 10 = completely agree; α : Cronbach's alpha; CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted

| SERVICE FAILURES | |
|---|-------|
| <i>Have you had a service failure in the retailer in which you purchased your smartphone?</i> | |
| Items | % |
| No | 64.62 |
| Yes | 35.38 |

| SERVICE FAILURES SOLVED | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| <i>What was the response of retailer X after hearing your complaint?</i> | | |
| Items | % | |
| | Yes | No |
| I have not had any response from the retailer | 30.82 | 4.56 |
| The retailer denied the complaint and did nothing | 27.83 | 7.55 |
| The retailer put the blame on me | 30.66 | 4.72 |
| The retailer apologized for faults caused | 25.94 | 9.43 |
| The retailer took responsibility for it fault | 25.31 | 10.06 |
| The retailer offered me some compensation | 30.03 | 5.35 |

| RESEARCH SHOPPING | |
|---|-------|
| <i>Referring to the shopping journey, of this pair of sentences, say which one more closely reflects your shopping behavior</i> | |
| Items | % |
| "I searched for information and purchased the mobile phone using just a single channel (physical store or the Internet)" | 59.00 |
| "I searched for information and purchased the mobile phone using multiple channels (physical store and the Internet)" | 41.00 |

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