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Digital Communication Actors In The Formation Of Artificial Intelligence Discourse On Tiktok: A Netnographic Analysis

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Abstract

The rapid popularization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has extended beyond academic and industrial spaces into everyday social media discourse, with TikTok emerging as one of the most active arenas for AI-related public conversation. Although prior research has extensively examined TikTok's algorithmic affordances and AI-related content circulation, limited attention has been given to the communicative roles of digital actors who actively shape public discourse on AI within TikTok's participatory environment. This study examines how digital communication actors contribute to the formation, circulation, and reinforcement of AI discourse on TikTok through a qualitative netnographic approach. Data were collected from 45 publicly accessible TikTok videos published between May 2024 and June 2026, through non-participant observation using purposive quota sampling based on seven AI-related hashtags: #ArtificialIntelligence, #AI, #ChatGPT, #AITools, #AIIndonesia, #TeknologiAI, and #MachineLearning. Engagement metrics including likes, comment counts, and save counts were documented for each video. The analysis identifies five dominant communicative roles performed by digital actors: educators, opinion leaders, popularizers, critics, and amplifiers. Each role contributes distinct narrative framings of AI as a productivity tool, an economic opportunity, a threat to employment, an ethical concern, or a popular cultural trend. TikTok is positioned as an algorithmic digital public sphere where technological discourse is shaped through content formats, hashtag structures, visible engagement dynamics, and platform visibility mechanisms rather than unilaterally transmitted

Keywords: Digital communication actors; artificial intelligence discourse; TikTok; netnography; algorithmic public sphere

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence has become one of the most widely discussed technological phenomena in contemporary public life. No longer confined to academic laboratories or technology industries, AI is now a subject of everyday conversation across social media platforms, where its meanings, implications, and risks are actively debated by diverse publics. This shift aligns with Jungherr & Schroeder (2023) argument that AI has increasingly become an object of public discourse, with its social meanings shaped not only by developers and experts but by a broader range of communicative actors operating in digital spaces.

Among the platforms where AI discourse has flourished, TikTok occupies a particularly significant position. Unlike conventional social networking platforms, TikTok combines short-form video, an algorithmic recommendation system known as the For You Page (FYP), and participatory features including comments, duets, and stitches. Gerbaudo (2024) argues that TikTok has fundamentally transformed the logic of social media publics, shifting from social networks to algorithmically constructed social interest clusters. Within this environment, AI has emerged as a prominent topic across a wide range of content formats, from tutorials on AI tools and reviews of ChatGPT (Ulrich, 2025), to AI-based face filter experiments Razali & Ramonita (2025), to ethical concerns surrounding deepfake and face-swap technologies (Okviosa et al., 2025).

Critically, AI discourse on TikTok is not produced through video content alone. It is shaped through the interaction between content creators, captions, hashtags, visible engagement dynamics, and the platform's algorithmic visibility logic. Richter (2025) demonstrates that content creators play a significant role in shaping public AI imaginaries the collective images and understandings of what AI is and how it should be perceived. Schellewald (2021) similarly

emphasizes that narratives about algorithms actively shape algorithmic imaginaries within digital society. Bhandari & Bimo (2022) further reveal that TikTok users actively negotiate their understanding of the algorithmic systems that structure their digital experience through what they term the "algorithmized self".

Previous studies have examined TikTok's algorithmic affordances (Grandinetti, 2021; Obreja, 2024), user engagement and human-AI interaction (Kang & Lou, 2022), and participatory features in public discourse formation (Quick & Maddox, 2024). However, limited attention has been given to the specific communicative roles of digital actors as analytical units in the formation of AI discourse. Most existing studies approach this topic from the perspective of platform infrastructure or user behavior rather than from the perspective of actor-based discourse formation.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on digital communication actors as the primary unit of analysis. It is guided by three research questions: (1) Who are the digital communication actors involved in the formation of AI discourse on TikTok? (2) What communicative roles do these actors perform in shaping AI discourse? (3) How do engagement patterns on TikTok indicate audience resonance toward different AI discourse framings? This study contributes by proposing an actor-based typology of AI discourse formation on TikTok classifying five communicative roles: educators, opinion leaders, popularizers, critics, and amplifiers within a netnographic framework affirmed by Ulloa-López et al. (2025) and incorporating the ethical framework proposed by Cheah (2025) for netnographic research involving AI.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a netnographic method. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this research is to understand the meanings, narratives, and communicative patterns produced by digital actors in the process of AI discourse formation, rather than quantifying their frequency statistically. Netnography was adopted as the primary method because the research objects exist within digital communities and interactions on TikTok, a space that requires methodological and ethical reflexivity, as Zhao (2024) argues in relation to the positionality demands of digital ethnographic research on social media platforms.

Research Site

The research site is TikTok, with a focus on Indonesian-language AI-related content as well as globally circulating content that generated significant engagement among Indonesian users. This scope was defined to ensure contextual relevance and accountability of the data within the Indonesian digital communication landscape.

Data Source and Sampling

Data were collected through non-participant observation of publicly accessible AI-related TikTok content between May 2024 and June 2026. The final data corpus consisted of 45 TikTok video items with their corresponding captions, hashtags, and engagement metrics (likes, comment counts, and save counts). This study applied purposive quota sampling to ensure balanced representation across the seven AI-related hashtags, with each hashtag contributing approximately six to seven videos to the final corpus. Content discovery and sampling were conducted using seven AI-related hashtags: #ArtificialIntelligence (6 videos), #AI (6 videos), #ChatGPT (7 videos), #AITools (6 videos), #AIIndonesia (6 videos), #TeknologiAI (7 videos), and #MachineLearning (7 videos). Inclusion criteria required content to: (1) explicitly discuss AI, its applications, or related technologies; (2) be in Indonesian or attract significant Indonesian audience engagement; and (3) be from publicly accessible accounts. Exclusion criteria excluded

spam accounts, unrelated promotional content, private accounts, and content with no substantive AI-related engagement. Documentary records were made of video captions, hashtags, and engagement metrics for each item in the corpus. All engagement metrics, including likes, comment counts, and save counts, were recorded from publicly visible TikTok interface indicators at the time of observation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through six stages: (1) data familiarization, involving systematic review of all 45 collected items to identify recurring themes and actor types; (2) actor identification, classifying communicative actors based on profile characteristics and content function; (3) thematic coding, categorizing AI discourse into thematic frames such as AI as productivity tool, AI as threat, AI as economic opportunity, AI as ethical concern, and AI as cultural trend; (4) discourse categorization, mapping thematic frames to actor types; (5) engagement analysis, examining likes, comment counts, and save counts as indicators of audience resonance and discursive salience; and (6) netnographic interpretation, reading how TikTok's digital culture shapes public understanding of AI and contributes to discourse formation. This analytical process aligns with the framework proposed by Ulloa-López et al. (2025) regarding the methodological convergences of netnography and discourse analysis, as well as with Sahi et al. (2026) in reading the transactional and interactional functions of AI as a discourse actor in social media video content.

Research Ethics

To protect user privacy, all usernames and profile identifiers are referenced using anonymized actor codes in the analytical discussion. Captions quoted in this study are drawn from publicly accessible TikTok content and are used solely for academic analysis. No interaction was conducted with users during the data collection process, and no private or restricted content was accessed. This ethical protocol follows the framework established by Cheah (2025) for AI-augmented netnographic research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Landscape of AI Discourse on TikTok

Analysis of the 45-item data corpus revealed three dominant content types in the formation of AI discourse on TikTok. Of the total corpus, 33 items (73.3%) were classified as educational content comprising tutorials, tool reviews, and practical guides; 7 items (15.6%) were classified as entertainment content including AI experiments and creative demonstrations; and 5 items (11.1%) were classified as opinion content consisting of personal perspectives on AI's social implications. The distribution of content types across the corpus is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of AI-Related TikTok Content by Type (N=45)

Content Type	N (%)	Description	Dominant Hashtags
Educational	33 (73.3%)	Tutorials, tool reviews, how-to guides	#AITools, #ChatGPT, #AIIndonesia
Entertainment	7 (15.6%)	Face filters, AI experiments, creative effects	#TeknologiAI, #MachineLearning, #AITools
Opinion	5 (11.1%)	Social impact commentary, ethical debate	#TeknologiAI, #AI, #MachineLearning

The dominance of educational content is consistent with Ulrich (2025), who demonstrates that AI-related TikTok content predominantly takes the form of practical tutorials and tool recommendations. The seven most frequently represented hashtags in the corpus were #ChatGPT, #TeknologiAI, and #MachineLearning (7 videos each), followed by #ArtificialIntelligence, #AI, #AITools, and #AIIndonesia (6 videos each). Engagement metrics across the corpus varied substantially, ranging from 0 likes to 461,500 likes, with an overall corpus mean of approximately 45,782 likes per video. Entertainment content yielded the highest single-item engagement, while educational content yielded the highest aggregate engagement across the corpus.

A particularly noteworthy pattern in the corpus was that high-save-count videos save counts frequently exceeding or approximating like counts in educational content indicate that audiences treat AI tutorial content as reference material for future use rather than merely passive consumption. For instance, Creator E2's video on ChatGPT settings for bypassing plagiarism detection accumulated 195,600 likes and 190,400 saves a near-equivalent save-to-like ratio that signals strong instrumental value attribution among audiences.

Identification of Digital Communication Actors

Based on the observation data, five categories of digital communication actors were identified as active participants in AI discourse formation on TikTok. Table 2 summarizes their communicative functions, content types, dominant AI framings, and representative examples drawn from the corpus.

Table 2. Digital Communication Actors in AI Discourse Formation on TikTok

Actor Category	Communicative Function	Content Type	Dominant AI Framing	Representative Caption Excerpt
Technology educators	Explaining and instructing	Tutorials, tool reviews	AI as productivity tool	"Cara Nulis artikel ilmiah 20+ halaman cuma <5 menit pakai Claude AI, Gratis!" (Creator E4, 28,100 likes)
Digital influencers / opinion leaders	Popularizing and persuading	Trend-based, lifestyle, monetization content	AI as economic opportunity	"AI yang sering dipake apa nih? save dulu ajaa" (Creator P1, 69,600 likes)
Technology practitioners / experts	Legitimizing and correcting	Expert commentary, technical clarification	AI as technical innovation	"Apa itu Machine Learning? 9 algoritma, 3 kategori." (Expert T1, 32,200 likes)
Ordinary users	Responding and amplifying	Visible engagement responses	AI as uncertainty or threat	High comment counts and save counts on videos addressing academic, ethical, and employment-related AI concerns
Media and institutional accounts	Informing and agenda-setting	News clips, public information	AI as societal / environmental concern	"AI's environmental footprint could grow dramatically... water consumption may rival needs of 1.3 billion people." (Media Actor M1, 461,500 likes)

Table 3. Selected Corpus Items: Actor Type, Engagement, and AI Framing

Actor Code	Actor Type	Likes	Comments	Saves	Caption Excerpt / AI Framing
Creator E1	Technology educator	172,900	5,922	151,800	"ngerjain skripsi berbulan-bulan? kelamaan!! nih sekarang ada Karyatulis AI..." AI as time-saving academic tool
Creator E2	Technology educator	195,600	1,113	190,400	"SETTINGAN CHAT GPT PENAKLUK PLAGIASI" AI as academic writing aid
Creator E3	Technology educator	146,400	590	130,600	"Tinggalin Scholar GPT... Gunakan Consensus GPT dengan AI Reference yang gokil!" AI as research productivity tool
Institutional Actor I1	Opinion leader / institutional	84,800	3,410	3,944	"AI bukan lagi sekadar teknologi masa depan... etika adalah fondasi yang tidak boleh ditinggalkan." AI as ethical responsibility
Critic C1	Critic	48,700	473	8,600	"AI lebih berbahaya di Indonesia... either we lose or die kalo kita ga adaptasi" AI as existential employment threat
Creator L1	Digital influencer	99,600	103	68,900	"jangan pada berantem ya para ai pilihanku" AI as popular cultural lifestyle trend
Media Actor M1	Media / institutional	461,500	10,700	22,000	"AI-related water consumption may rival the annual needs of 1.3 billion people." AI as global societal concern
Expert T1	Technology practitioner	32,200	167	11,700	"Apa itu Machine Learning? 9 algoritma, 3 kategori. Biar kebayang gambaran besarnya dulu." AI as technical domain knowledge

a. Technology Educators

Technology educators produced instructional content explaining AI mechanisms, recommending tools, and providing step-by-step tutorials. Their content was predominantly practical and benefit-oriented, framing AI primarily as a productivity tool accessible to non-technical users. The dominant practical frame among educators in the corpus was AI as an academic writing aid: creators offered guidance on using ChatGPT, Claude, and related tools for thesis writing, article paraphrasing, and managing AI detection tools. Creator E1 framed AI as a dramatic time-saver ("ngerjain skripsi berbulan-bulan? kelamaan!!"), accumulating 172,900 likes and 151,800 saves indicating strong audience resonance with this productivity framing.

However, educational AI content also reveals an ambivalent framing. While AI is promoted as a productivity tool for academic writing and research assistance, some captions blur the boundary between legitimate learning support and ethically problematic practices, particularly when AI is framed as a tool for bypassing plagiarism detection or producing academic work instantly. This indicates that AI literacy discourse on TikTok does not only involve technical skill acquisition, but also raises questions of academic integrity and responsible technology use.

A recurring sub-pattern within educational content was tension between AI's utility and its ethical risks. Creator E5's caption ("Hati hati semua nya dalam memilih jasa parafrase AI jangan sampai melakukan kecurangan seperti ini ya") introduces ethical caution within an otherwise instructional framing. Creator E6 similarly challenged the reliability of AI detectors, arguing that such tools "hanya nebak pola statistik, bukan beneran tau." These sub-framings reveal that even educators who promote AI productivity introduce ethical nuance, while visible engagement patterns suggest strong audience attention toward academic integrity and responsible AI use.

b. Digital Influencers and Opinion Leaders

Digital influencers popularized AI as a productive lifestyle trend and digital economic opportunity. Creator P1, appearing in multiple corpus items, positioned AI tools as curated lifestyle choices ("AI yang sering dipake apa nih? save dulu ajaa"), generating 69,600 likes across one item alone. This pattern is consistent with findings by Wijaya & Melissa (2025), where young audiences' heuristic trust in AI-related content was significantly shaped by the perceived credibility of the presenting figure.

A particularly notable instance of opinion leadership in the corpus was Institutional Actor I1, whose video on AI and Indonesian youth framed AI simultaneously as an opportunity and an ethical responsibility: "AI dapat menjadi alat yang mempercepat proses belajar... Namun, kecanggihan teknologi harus tetap diimbangi dengan kemampuan berpikir kritis... Kuasai teknologinya, pegang teguh integritasnya." This video attracted 3,410 comments the second highest comment count in the corpus suggesting that institutional authority combined with normative framing generates significant discursive activity.

c. Technology Practitioners and Experts

Technology practitioners and experts provided technical authority and knowledge legitimacy to AI discourse formation. Expert T1's video on machine learning algorithms ("Apa itu Machine Learning? 9 algoritma, 3 kategori") and Expert T2's detailed explanation of ML model evaluation represent this actor type's characteristic content: structured, terminology-precise, and aimed at bridging general audiences with technical knowledge. Expert T3 further demonstrated this role through demonstration-based content on skin cancer classification using YOLO and food nutrition detection using MobileNetV2, providing concrete real-world AI applications as legitimizing evidence.

d. Ordinary Users

Ordinary users extended AI discourse through visible engagement responses attached to creator-produced content. Karpova & Borymska (2022) demonstrate that identity presentation on TikTok shapes how users position themselves in technological discussions. Across the corpus, ordinary user participation was observed through likes, comment counts, and save counts rather than through systematic comment-content coding. High save counts on educational content suggest that audiences treated AI tutorials as reference material, while high comment counts on ethical, environmental, and employment-related videos indicate stronger discursive salience around socially consequential AI issues.

e. Media and Institutional Accounts

Media organizations and institutional accounts distributed formal information and structured framings of AI developments. Media Actor M1's content about AI's environmental

footprint achieved the highest engagement in the entire corpus (461,500 likes; 10,700 comments), demonstrating that when AI discourse connects to global-scale societal concerns resource consumption, ecological impact it transcends niche technical audiences and reaches broad publics. This finding aligns with Omeish et al. (2025) regarding credibility hierarchies within TikTok's participatory environment.

Communicative Roles of Actors in AI Discourse Formation

Based on their communicative functions, digital actors were mapped onto five distinct discursive roles in the formation of AI discourse on TikTok. First, actors as educators established the baseline informational frame through which many users first encountered AI-related topics on the platform. Second, actors as opinion leaders shaped public attitudes toward AI whether as beneficial, dangerous, or requiring caution aligning with Richter (2025) concept of public AI imaginaries wherein certain voices acquire the authority to define what AI means for society at large. Third, actors as popularizers made AI topics accessible, engaging, and potentially viral; Zulli & Zulli (2020) describe this through technological mimesis and imitation publics on TikTok, wherein replicable content formats accelerate the spread of particular AI framings. Fourth, actors as critics challenged dominant positive framings of AI, raising concerns about employment displacement, privacy risks, and information manipulation, consistent with Jerasa & Burriss (2024). Fifth, actors as amplifiers extended AI discourse reach through visible engagement responses, particularly likes, comment counts, and saves, increasing the public salience of selected AI framings, as demonstrated by Quick & Maddox (2024).

Patterns of AI Discourse Formation on TikTok

Across the observation data, five dominant discourse patterns in AI discourse formation were identified, each corresponding to a prevalent thematic framing of AI in the corpus. Table 4 maps these patterns to actor types and representative corpus evidence.

Table 4. Dominant AI Discourse Patterns, Actor Roles, and Corpus Evidence

Discourse Pattern	AI Framing	Dominant Actor Type	Corpus Evidence
AI as productivity tool	Accelerates writing, research, and data tasks	Technology educators	Creator E2 (195,600 likes), Creator E3 (146,400 likes), Creator E1 (172,900 likes)
AI as employment / existential threat	AI replaces human cognitive and creative roles	Critics, ordinary users	Critic C1: "either we lose or die kalo kita ga adaptasi" (48,700 likes, 473 comments)
AI as digital economic opportunity	Entrepreneurship, monetization, career advancement	Digital influencers	Creator P2: "Gaji Rp50 Juta/Bulan di 2030? Ini Skill AI yang Wajib Dipelajari Sekarang!" (10,200 likes)
AI as ethical and safety concern	Deepfakes, integrity violations, societal risk	Critics, media accounts	Institutional Actor I1: "etika adalah fondasi yang tidak boleh ditinggalkan" (84,800 likes, 3,410 comments)
AI as popular cultural trend	Creative play, aesthetic exploration, social currency	Digital influencers, entertainment creators	Creator L1 (99,600 likes), Creator L2 (Google AI announcement), Creator L3 (Veo 3 content)

These five patterns were not mutually exclusive. In many corpus items, a single video simultaneously activated multiple framings. Creator P1's video ("SAVE! Daripada uplaod [sic] pdf ke claude, mending cobain cara ini deh"), for instance, frames AI as both a practical tool and a lifestyle recommendation, generating 17,500 likes and 15,400 saves, suggesting that hybrid framings produce particularly high audience retention behavior. This polyphonic quality of AI

discourse on TikTok indicates that meaning-making around AI is shaped by multiple framings rather than transmitted through a single dominant narrative.

Engagement Metrics as Indicators of Audience Resonance

Engagement metrics comprising likes, comment counts, and save counts functioned as quantifiable indicators of audience resonance across the 45-item corpus. Engagement disparity was substantial: likes ranged from 0 to 461,500, while save counts ranged from minimal figures to 190,400. A particularly notable pattern was the high save-to-like ratio observed in educational content. Creator E2's video on ChatGPT settings accumulated 195,600 likes and 190,400 saves, while Creator E1's thesis-writing tutorial yielded 172,900 likes and 151,800 saves. These near-equivalent or high save-to-like ratios indicate that audiences engage with AI tutorial content not merely as passive consumption but as reference material for future use, assigning strong instrumental value to educational framings.

Comment counts across the corpus showed that AI discourse generates higher response intensity when connected to stakes beyond individual tool use. Media Actor M1's video on AI's environmental footprint attracted 10,700 comments alongside 461,500 likes; Institutional Actor I1's video on AI ethics drew 3,410 comments on 84,800 likes; and the educational content on AI-assisted thesis writing generated 5,922 comments on 172,900 likes. These figures contrast with the corpus median of 140 comments, indicating that ethical, environmental, and employment-related AI framings consistently generate higher audience response rates than purely technical framings.

Save counts were highest in educational content, particularly videos involving academic writing assistance, research tool recommendations, and productivity optimization. Content addressing AI as an economic opportunity or lifestyle recommendation such as Creator P1's multiple corpus appearances also generated substantial saves relative to likes, suggesting audience intent to revisit curated content. These engagement patterns indicate that different AI discourse framings attract distinct visible audience behaviors: ethical and societal framings generate higher comment intensity, while productivity and lifestyle framings generate save-intensive reference behavior.

TikTok as an Algorithmic Digital Public Sphere

The findings collectively suggest that TikTok functions not merely as a content distribution medium but as a space for the formation of public opinion facilitated and structured by the For You Page algorithm. The extreme engagement disparity in the corpus ranging from 0 likes (Creator X1) to 461,500 likes (Media Actor M1) suggests that algorithmic visibility may contribute to the unequal public salience of AI framings, although this study does not directly measure FYP distribution. Actors with higher engagement rates consistently demonstrate greater capacity to shape public perception, a dynamic that Jones (2023) characterizes as a public struggle for control over audience commodities.

AI discourse formation on TikTok is thus constituted through the interaction of actors, content, hashtags, visible engagement dynamics, and algorithmic visibility logic, confirming Gerbaudo (2024) argument that TikTok has transformed digital public space into segmented yet participatory interest clusters. The hashtag structure of the corpus reflects this segmentation: #ChatGPT and #AIIndonesia content skews toward practical and academic framing, while #MachineLearning content attracts a more technically-oriented audience and #TeknologiAI content encompasses the widest range of framings from skill development to existential concern. Comparable algorithmic structuring of discourse has been observed in political activism contexts (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022; Hautea et al., 2021) and cultural identity formation (Hao, 2024), suggesting that TikTok's algorithmic logic consistently organizes public discourse across diverse thematic domains.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that AI discourse on TikTok is formed by multiple digital communication actors who perform distinct roles in producing, distributing, critiquing, and amplifying AI-related narratives. Analysis of 45 publicly accessible TikTok videos published between May 2024 and June 2026, sampled through seven AI-related hashtags via purposive quota sampling, identified five communicative roles educator, opinion leader, popularizer, critic, and amplifier showing that AI discourse formation on TikTok is neither singular nor linear, but shaped through the interaction of content, engagement dynamics, hashtag structures, and platform visibility mechanisms.

TikTok thus constitutes an algorithmic digital public sphere in which AI discourse develops rapidly, accessibly, and participatorily, consistent with the algorithmic frameworks discussed by Schellewald (2021, 2022) and Bhandari & Bimo (2020, 2022). The netnographic approach adopted in this study reveals that discourse formation occurs not only through video content but through the full ecosystem of captions, hashtags, and engagement dynamics shaped by algorithmic curation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to digital communication scholarship by foregrounding digital actors as the analytical unit in platform-based discourse research, complementing existing studies of AI discourse (Montana & Buzzo, 2025; Omeish et al., 2025) by demonstrating the contextual, actor-driven nature of AI meaning-making. Practically, content creators, educators, and public institutions should recognize their roles as discourse actors and invest in strengthening AI literacy so that public understanding of AI extends beyond viral trends to encompass a more critical, informed engagement with AI's risks, ethical dimensions, and societal implications.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it is limited to publicly accessible TikTok content and does not measure algorithmic exposure or FYP distribution directly. Second, the corpus of 45 items may not fully capture the diversity of AI discourse across all languages and cultural contexts on TikTok. Third, comment data were observed but not systematically coded as a separate analytical unit, limiting conclusions about the full range of audience discourse patterns. Future research may productively extend this framework through systematic comment analysis, comparative study across platforms such as X, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts, and cross-cultural examination of how AI imaginaries are locally inflected in different national and linguistic contexts.

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