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Obstacles to and suggestions for successful township tourism in Alexandra Township, South Africa

In this paper, we seek to examine obstacles to township tourism development in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, an area characterised by crime, unemployment, and poverty. Although the government implemented initiatives since 2001 to upgrade Alexandra as a tourism destination, the township remains underdeveloped. This paper reports on empirical evidence conducted with key informants to understand some of the significant tourism obstacles. A growing population is resulting in environmental deterioration, and social services are lacking. Other difficulties include a lack of tourism skills and education, poor tourism business support, lack of gender equality and disability support, and high crime. The government and tourism industry stakeholders must combine efforts to promote tourism skills and support small businesses. In the Global South, where slum tourism is influenced largely by exotic surroundings, South African and the Alexandra Township, in particular, has the opportunity to capture its rich history, culture, and heritage uniquely.

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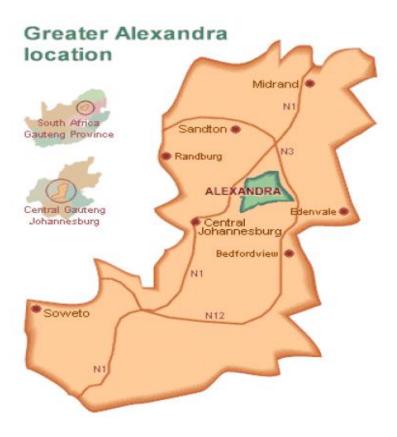
Introduction

Tourism research in South Africa shows that township tourism makes an important contribution to the transformation of poor urban areas by generating income for development (Frenzel, 2013). In the global South, tourism is associated with development, transformation, and sustainability (Klepsch, 2010). In South Africa, township tourism is viewed as sustainable, pro-poor, and an inclusive form of tourism, which has grown in popularity and gained the attention of prominent scholars and researchers (Ashely & Roe, 2002). Butler (2010) states that sustainability, the creation of jobs, and poverty alleviation are vital to overcoming socio-economic and development problems with regard to township tourism.

Township tourism became especially important during the transition to democracy in 1994, with visitors coming to explore diverse cultures, and Soweto and Langa Townships emerging as the most visited destinations, especially due to prominent anti-apartheid leaders having resided in Soweto. The apartheid government for racial segregation also directly established the Soweto and Langa Townships. As a poor area of rich heritage, Alexandra Township also becomes a focus for tourism development, emphasizing job creation to alleviate poverty. Alexandra also realised its tourism growth opportunity much later than other prominent townships since the Gauteng provincial government only invested in Alexandra in 2001 (Mabotja, 2012; Rogerson, 2012).

Alexandra falls under the municipality of the City of Johannesburg, the wealthiest city, biggest commercial centre and most significant economic hub in South Africa (see figure 1 below for the location of the Alexandra Township in Johannesburg). The township is neighboured by the affluent suburbs of Wendywood, Kelvin, and Sandton. Alexandra Township covers an area of over 800 ha, and although its infrastructure was designed for a population of around 70,000, the current population is estimated at between 180,000 and 750,000 (Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 2000). Within the Johannesburg

Metropolitan Council, Alexandra falls within Region 7, stretching approximately 16 km to the north of central Johannesburg (Rolfes, Steinbrink & Uhl, 2003). The township consists of several sections, including Old Alexandra, Marlboro, Setswetla, East Bank, Far East Bank, Tsutsumani, and River Park. The Jukskei River passes through Alexandra, dividing the township into the east and west banks.

Source: Human Science Research Council (2003)

Figure 1: Location of Alexandra Township with Johannesburg and the Gauteng Province

Township tours have been conducted since democracy in South Africa, with tours being offered to international visitors by small tourism companies (Butler, 2010; Mengich, 2011). Today, the township tourism segment has grown to boost both domestic and international tourism. Township tourism is increasingly seen as a pro-poor tourism niche within the tourism industry (National Tourism Sector Strategy - NTSS, 2011). It is also pointed out in the NTSS that tourism has the potential to boost domestic tourism, gross

domestic product, and small businesses and create jobs (Dürr & Jaffe, 2012). In 2001, the provincial government identified Alexandra Township as needing urgent redevelopment as a tourism destination. Initiatives begun in 2001 included the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) and Alexandra Tourism Development Project (ATDP), both of which were aimed at developing the township and improving tourism for community beneficiation.

However, despite these initiatives, tourism development in the township is far from advanced, with poverty and unemployment remaining high, and tourism business growth remaining poor. Considering that, the South African government identified tourism as a tool to promote development in Alexandra, and that Alexandra is nevertheless experiencing poor economic growth and social development and has an underdeveloped tourism industry more than 20 years into democracy, this paper explores the obstacles to tourism growth experienced by the township.

Related Works

Township tourism, also referred to as slum tourism, is not a new global phenomenon, although it became recognised in South Africa after the transition to democracy. In response to criticism of mass tourism since the 1980s, a new and responsible form of tourism gained recognition in major cities within the global South (Costa, 2013). In general, a slum or township is an informal area occupied by a large number of people and which is located near a city. Mengich (2011) describes slums or townships as often characterised by semi-standard housing, a lack of security, and in most cases large populations, crime, poverty, unemployment, and limited access to municipal services, resulting in poor sanitation and sewage management and unsafe drinking water. Slum tourism is defined as guided visits undertaken into the most disadvantaged areas of globalising cities such as Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. In Australia, research shows that slum tourism has

transformed numerous crime-ridden, run-down, marginalised major urban areas into potential tourism destinations (Dürr & Jaffe, 2012).

Slum tours are popular in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Dharavi, Kibera, and Soweto (Butler, 2010). Governments have generally tried to prioritise tourism to develop poor areas and promote an inclusive economy. Rogerson (2012) states that in slum areas, culture and heritage are commodified into a product for tourism, resulting in economic growth. In South Africa, township tourism is shaped by the history and heritage of the area, with Soweto a popular destination offering tours to historical sites (Rogerson, 2011). Dürr & Jaffe (2012) suggest that tourist visits to townships open up opportunities for black businesses to capitalise on tourism that is supported by the government as a tool for economic growth and poverty alleviation. As it is pro-poor focused, tourism is vital to unlocking opportunities for the poor. In 2019, the importance of tourism was specifically mentioned in the State of the Nation address, with government planning to more than double international tourist arrivals to 21 million by 2030 through revitalising the country's tourism brand (South African Government, 2019). Tourism is vital for wealth redistribution, for reducing inequalities, and for creating jobs. The tourism policy is based on five key principles and is driven by a need for social and economic transformation (Kaplan, 2004). These are social equity, environmental integrity, economic growth, co-operation, and sustainability (NTSS, 2011). Thus, the importance of tourism and township tourism, in particular, cannot be overemphasised if South Africa is to overcome many of the development problems faced within townships across the country.

The development of tourism in the township areas across the country has mainly been influenced by their unique locations, diverse cultures, and the country's historical and political background, reflecting the legacy of apartheid (Booyens, 2010). Tourism development in the township areas of South Africa tends to differ from that in other countries in the global South (such as Brazil and India), where slum tours are influenced by their exotic

surroundings (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2007). Dürr & Jaffe (2012) have argued that with the growing interest in visiting township areas, an opportunity has opened up for black-owned, small-scale guided tour organisations. As in any other country in the global South, slum tourism in South Africa is supported by the government and promoted by tourism companies as a valuable tool contributing significantly to poverty alleviation in many poor urban areas (Costa, 2013). As it is pro-poor and community-based, this niche tourism segment can unlock opportunities for local residents to be more effectively involved in developing their local tourism industries (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2007).

Research Problem Statement

Alexandra realised its tourism potential only fairly recently. Kaplan (2004) reports that the government began emphasising the development of tourism in Alexandra in 2001. In consequence, tourism development in Alexandra Township is still to be developed, lagging behind Soweto and Langa townships, which are advanced in this regard. The aim of the ARP and ATDP was to develop Alexandra into a tourism destination. Mabotja (2012) states that to implement tourism, the projects joined up with the Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA) to identify places with the potential to grow the economy and create jobs.

To involve residents, the Alexandra Tourism Association (ATA) and Alexandra Heritage Team (AHT), both community tourism initiatives, were formed. A key development is the Alexandra Heritage Centre, consisting of a tourism information office, training room, and restaurant. Route of Rhythm was also formed, incorporating various attractions and activities. To promote heritage, over 100 sites were identified, with 30 as part of the route (e.g., Mandela Yard). These are key products for extending the tourism-offering menu to enhance the tourism experience. Other progress has included improved infrastructure (roads, footbridges, and streetlights), a Pan African Mall, public transport facilities, and parks

(Sinwell, 2005). There has also been growth in local businesses (e.g., tour operators, restaurants, and crafters), training, ecological awareness, and cultural activities (Butler, 2010). To assist local businesses, the government collaborated with the Alexandra Chamber of Commerce and Alexandra Business Forum, with the Alexandra Tourism Business Association being formed in 2004. The government has also emphasised training provision, and the ARP and ATDP have brought about some progress in Alexandra's becoming a tourism destination. However, despite these interventions, Alexandra remains underdeveloped, and tourism does not make a meaningful contribution to creating much-needed jobs for residents. Mabotja (2011) states that the ARP has encountered obstacles and that this has delayed progress. Lack of skills and local business growth, misuse of state funds, crime, and poor marketing of tourist sites are significant constraints. It is thus useful to explore the actual challenges for township tourism growth despite tourism interventions in Alexandra.

Research Method and Design

In conducting the study, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were held with informants (representatives of government, the private sector, civil society, and NGOs) between June and August 2016 in Alexandra and Johannesburg. This helped to provide an understanding of the obstacles to tourism growth encountered since 2001. In all, twenty-one interviews were conducted, of which sixteen informants are used for this paper. Six were with provincial government agency officials, with four in Johannesburg at the Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA) and the Gauteng Enterprise Propeller (GEP). In Alexandra, two interviews were held with officials from the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (DEDaT), who carried out a tourism study in Alexandra. The rest were held in Alexandra and involved residents (professionals,

leaders, etc.) and the owners of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) (tour operators, restaurant owners, etc.).

The four NGO officials interviewed were from community-based tourism organisations (the Alexandra Tourism Association, Alexandra Heritage Association, Alexandra Heritage Centre, and Alexandra Tourism Information Centre). All informants agreed to be quoted. For collecting the data, a digital recorder was used, and the interviews were transcribed. Where necessary, secondary data were used to supplement the primary data. Transcription of the digital recordings was a useful method to analyse, interpret, and report the words of the participants into findings. Content analysis involving the coding of the data was employed. Content analysis allows one to evolve a theory that can explain a problem to be studied and pave the way for how such a problem can be addressed (Charmaz, 2012).

Thus, content analysis was used to categorise similar codes and identify the main themes. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), when coding is performed, the core category and concern (i.e., theme) eventually become more apparent. The core category then outlines or explains the issues or concerns studied in the substantive area, and reveals how the issues can be addressed properly. Three main themes are reported: theme one deals with key township tourism socio-environmental problems in Alexandra; theme two focuses on tourism business difficulties, and theme three involves tourism initiatives and why they may have limited scope for success. Some discussion follows before recommendations are proposed.

Data analysis and results

Theme one: Township tourism problems in Alexandra

Increasing population and poor environmental conditions for tourism

While Alexandra has witnessed some tourism progress over the years, it has remained underdeveloped and faces economic, environmental, and social difficulties, limiting tourism development. The population of Alexandra Township has grown enormously because of increased immigration, which has resulted in a further lack of social services and poor environmental quality. Informant A (personal interview, 23 June 2016: local government department official) stated that "due to closeness to a city and cheap housing, immigrants opt to stay in Alexandra." Over 100 000 immigrants come to Johannesburg annually, most of whom settle in Alexandra and Soweto. Informant A (personal interview, 23 June 2016) further noted that "Alexandra is small in land-mass. It was initially designed for 150 000 people in line with infrastructure and stands designed for single household and no backyard dwelling".

The services (sanitation and water supply) were designed for single households, but as the population grew, land scarcity and overcrowding have resulted. Currently, illegal shacks occupy most open spaces. Informant B (personal interview, 29 June 2016: manager of a small business in Alexandra) commented that the area had become a sprawling ghetto, with shacks erected above sewer lines. This affects tourism, as, among other things, tourism operators cannot find proper premises due to limited space. Informant A (personal interview, 23 June 2016) stated, "The sewage system often gets blocked. Thus, the municipality cannot do proper maintenance on sewage". According to informant C (personal interview, 15 July 2016: a tour operator in Alexandra), "with shacks built onto sewer pipes and poor sanitation, there is often wastes and dirty water running on roads." Informant C (personal interview, 15 July 2016) stated that because of shacks being built close together, streets are narrow, and some areas, such as Setswetla, are difficult to access by vehicle. Social ills of this nature have a negative effect on tourism development. Informant D (personal interview, 23 July 2016: learner and part-time tour guide at a cycling tour company in Alexandra) stated: "due to

congestion, it is hard for tour operators to conduct tours." According to informant E (personal interview, 1 August 2016: assistant manager at a small business and resident in Alexandra), tour operators thus cannot offer bus tours, as conditions allow for walking and cycling tours only.

Increasing crime and violence impacting on tourism growth

Crime has been a significant problem in Alexandra and has hindered tourism development. Statistics show that Alexandra Township experiences worse crime than other townships such as Tembisa and Soweto. Despite state intervention on crime, the area still has a bad reputation for both crime and violence. Informant F (personal interview, 24 June 2016: community-based tourism organisation officer in Alexandra) expressed the view that "Crime affect progress, while Alexandra seeks to promote tourism." The area is therefore viewed as unsafe, in part due to xenophobia. Social and political instability is common. Informant F (personal interview, 24 June 2016) observed that "violence affect tourism as it disturbs stability and affects relations between South Africa and other countries." Thus, domestic tourism suffers since visitor safety and security cannot be ensured. Although a crime prevention forum has been launched in Alexandra, out of fear and a lack of protection, few people report crime. In addition, violent protests affect tourism. Informant G (personal interview, 7 June 2016: government agency official in Johannesburg) stated: "when people demand services, protests become violent and people start looting from local shops owned by foreigners." Informant H (personal interview, 9 July 2016: a small business owner in Alexandra) noted that crime has a serious negative effect on tourism, thus hampering tourism growth.

A lack of leadership, corruption, and mismanagement of funds in government

A lack of proper government leadership and corruption hinder effective support for the development of township tourism. Corruption and the mismanagement of state funding resulted in government failure to bring about development to fulfill social needs. Informant C (personal communication, 15 July 2016) explained that corruption and the mismanagement of government funds have been undermining the ARP initiative, causing irreparable damage to the reputation of the government because people are losing faith in Alexandra because of poor social service delivery, poor environmental conditions and poor tourism support. Many people, particularly those living in the Setswetla and Jukskei River settlements, felt neglected by the government because of the limited development-taking place in these areas. The government has not been able to provide adequate social services to residents. Informant I (personal communication, 30 July 2016: owner of a cinema in Alexandra) described the dire situation in Alexandra:

> *"While tourism development was anticipated to create jobs for local residents in the inception of the ARP and ATDP, the rate of unemployment in Alexandra is higher than the national average rate (i.e., 27 percent). A majority of young people are unemployed, and a large number of households are still living in poverty. The issue of unemployment has an effect on the worsening poverty rates and lack of housing for many people…even though housing is being made available in every financial year, informal settlements in Alexandra hardly acknowledged the work of the ARP in terms of improvements in service delivery."*

A lack of leadership limited the government's potential intervention to provide skills training and business start-ups, as opposed to purely infrastructural support. According to Informant I (personal communication, 30 July 2016), developments have also occurred without the community's involvement or input into the process:

> *"There are many people still living in shacks and backyard dwellings, often feeling forgotten and left out of the developments that are taking place around community. Even though the constitution of the country allow people to equal access to shelter, the allocation of the RDP houses is not done appropriate. There are many people who had registered for houses soon after 1994 but still have not been given right to any RDP houses while others have come in recent years in Alexandra but already own houses provided by the RDP initiative. This is the case, especially with the new housing developments in Extension 7, Extension 8 and River Park."*

The government promised to develop infrastructure through the ARP, but although some important roads have been redeveloped, infrastructure maintenance has been a challenge. Informant J (personal communication, 13 June 2016: a local tour operator) argued that even though the development of infrastructure is taking place in Alexandra, road maintenance remains a problem. Informant D (personal communication, 23 July 2016) commented, "During the years leading to the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, it was part of the national and provincial plan for government to upgrade all roads in Johannesburg and such developments were noticeable across the country, including in Alexandra." However, Informant K (personal communication, 13 June 2016: a resident and local tour guide) reported, "Since 2010, the maintenance of roads in Alexandra has not been taken seriously by the provincial government, leading to serious damage to the roads". Due to poor service provision and poor service delivery, residents did not see tourism development as a high priority.

Theme two: Tourism business difficulties

Lack of tourism knowledge and skills

Tourism knowledge and skills were generally severely lacking in the township. According to informant N (personal interview, 17 July 2016: small business owner in Alexandra), "the formerly deprived area still lacks access [to] educational opportunities. Thus, inequalities widens the gap between poor and rich (Sandton and Alexandra)". Inequality adversely affected residents (including women and people with disabilities) in Alexandra in terms of education. Informant L argued that in low-income families, efforts are made to educate boy children, but not necessarily, girls and so women miss education. However, illiteracy was also prevalent among men. While SMEs dominate tourism, most were operated without business, financial, and budgeting skills. People need to be educated about tourism. Informant G (personal interview, 7 June 2016) reported, "due to lack of skills, SMEs open-up and shut down within a year. Information is needed to understand the seasonal nature of tourism to survive in the market". SMEs collapsed due to a lack of entrepreneurial skills to grow a tourism business. Informant E (personal interview, 1 August 2016: assistant manager at a community-based tourism organisation in Alexandra) considered training to be vital to empower the community and grow the local economy. The findings also show obtaining assistance from the state to be a long, complicated, and difficult process.

Lack of participation of women and people with disabilities

Gender inequality and prejudice against women limited the participation of women in tourism in Alexandra. Findings showed that while some progress is being made, men nevertheless dominate tourism and business in the area. Informant T (personal interview, 17 July 2016: owner of a small business in Alexandra) stated that women entrepreneurs face prejudice from men with a stereotypical mindset who are unwilling to share a workspace with women. Because of inequality and exclusion, women suffer the greatest lack of education and skills. This limits their potential for self-reliance and to work as tourism leaders in the

community. People with disabilities endure the most prejudice, as is evident in the high levels of unemployment and low skill levels among people with disabilities, who find it even harder to enter the tourism sector.

Informant L (personal interview, 17 July 2016: owner of a small business in Alexandra) stated that people with disabilities in business face the difficulty of limited knowledge on how and where to find assistance, and their specific needs as regards their disability are usually not acknowledged and catered for by the government. According to Informant M (personal communication in Alexandra: interview 3 July 2016, tourism officer, Department of Economic Development and Tourism), for people with disabilities, starting a business is difficult as a result of a lack of support and business assistance in the form of advice regarding registration, opening accounts, applying for capital loans, and so on. Thus, more needs to be done to assist women and people with disabilities in starting up and running tourism businesses.

Theme three: Difficulties relating to tourism development initiatives in Alexandra since 2001

Social History Project

Alexandra's tourism potential was identified in 2001, with several initiatives implemented, including the Social History Project. Informant N (personal interview, 9 July 2016: from an NGO in Alexandra) explained that the community is involved in tourism through community-based organisations (CBOs) (AHT and ATA). Informant H (personal interview, 9 July 2016: small business owner in Alexandra) noted that participation is evident in the Social History Project, established in 2008. Informant N (personal interview, 9 July 2016) reported that "the project seek to document local stories and heritage told by residents based on local narrative. It is supported by provincial government".

However, the project has encountered obstacles. According to informant O (personal interview, 16 July 2016: schoolteacher and resident in Alexandra), "[the] local history is unrecorded, unlike famous Soweto." Informant I (personal interview, 30 July 2016) noted that the history of Alexandra had only been recorded and published to a limited degree. Informant F (personal interview, 24 June 2016: community-based tourism organisation officer in Alexandra) added, "Soweto is known globally for its history and visitors hardly leave the country without visiting it."

The purpose of the Social History Project is to tell people's stories of the freedom struggle to offer an insight into the social and cultural narratives of Alexandra. Informant N (personal interview, 9 July 2016) noted, "Alexandra is an oldest townships and survived threats of demolition in the 1900s. It is home to political activists, musicians, poets and sport figures". Informant H (personal interview, 9 July 2016) identified the work of the project as telling unique local stories. The project has yet to be developed to its full potential.

Cycling and walking tours and the 'get-off-bus' campaign

Despite obstacles to tourism in Alexandra and a lack of tourism skills, the local community is trying to promote tourism. Informant P (personal interview, 13 June 2016: owner of small business and resident in Alexandra) reported: "there are campaigns led by tour operators, AHT and ATA to promote tourism by urging cycling and walking tours, like in Soweto." According to informant C (personal interview, 15 July 2016), bus tours are not promoted because they show a disregard for the local people, almost viewing them as zoo exhibits: "with bus tours visitors do not get off the bus to learn cultures and buy locally." Thus, it was important to get tourists to interact with locals, but in a safe and clean environment so that they can learn about local cultures and buy local goods. Informant H

(personal interview, 9 July 2016) cautioned that "although there is progress, crime and violence poses a threat for walking and cycling tours."

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite some government interventions and progress made with regard to tourism development in Alexandra, much has yet to be done in order for tourism to flourish and for residents to benefit meaningfully from it. The research on which this paper is based has shown that Alexandra Township tourism, unlike other prominent South African townships, is unfortunately still in its infancy, with numerous obstacles limiting its potential. Results indicate that the township faces obstacles such as high rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, lack of space for tourism businesses to operate, environmental challenges, lack of SME growth, poor government leadership and corruption, lack of tourism skills and knowledge, and a lack of tourism business opportunities for women and people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, township tourism is vital for economic growth and job creation for marginalised areas such as Alexandra. As literature has revealed, in the global South such as for countries India and Brazil, where slum tourism is influenced by exotic surroundings, South African and the Alexandra Township, in particular, have the opportunity to capture its rich history uniquely, culture, and heritage and to market these into a tourism product to seize the ensuring economic growth potential. Through effective marketing, Alexandra Township, and South Africa can capture local and international tourists, which will require a coordinated effort between the Alexandra community, government departments, tour operators, and businesses.

The following recommendations are offered as a means to improve tourism and overcome some of the obstacles encountered:

- With support from national and local governments, the provincial government should design and implement more localised tourism policies in consultation with the community. Policy must focus on skills development, entrepreneurship, local participation, and recognising the important role of women and people with disabilities.

- Provincial and local governments need to improve tourism infrastructure such as roads in the community as a matter of urgency if tourism businesses are to grow and be viable. The results indicate that it is also difficult for tourists to access sections of the township. Additionally, maintenance of infrastructure should be established regularly.

- There is a need for business service providers to collaborate with the government and to establish programmes to educate informal businesses and residents generally in terms of how to start up and operate tourism businesses.

- To fight crime and violence, the community should collaborate with local government and report crime. This will require community leaders and business owners to educate residents on how crime affects tourism in the township so that residents also take responsibility for ensuring safe tourism environments. Residents must support the community anti-crime prevention forums to fight crime and restore the image of Alexandra as a safe destination.

- To improve SMEs' economic viability, tourism businesses in Sandton must create linkages with SMEs in Alexandra for partnerships to involve the poor in tourism and offer them advice and business support. This could form part of their social responsibility programmes. There are many benefits of such a linkage, which will ensure that Alexandra becomes an attractive tourism destination with reduced crime and will benefit the surrounding suburbs such as Sandton. As the research above also highlighted, slum tourism has transformed numerous crime-ridden, run-down, marginalised major urban areas into potential tourism destinations for wider societal benefits. This also has

future benefits of addressing the glaring unequal development and inequality seen between Sandton and Alexandra.

Private tour operators must use the tourism route through Alexandra to key township market attractions, as is done in Soweto. There is an opportunity to link tourism and shopping in Alexandra by integrating the Pan-African Mall into the route. This also requires private operators to collaborate with local tourism businesses.

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