Factors of Public Speaking Anxiety among Postgraduate Students of Malaysian Public Universities in Online Presentations

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the contributing factors of public speaking anxiety (PSA) among international and Malaysian postgraduate students. To realise the study, a Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) and Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), were employed through a qualitative research design. Three postgraduate students were chosen according to a selective sampling method and interviewed using semi-structured interview protocol. The interview questions were adopted and customised to adhere to a situation specific setting, which is the online learning domain. Results indicated that fear of negative evaluation and making errors along with peer pressure were among the main reasons for PSA. It was also found that PSA had a significantly negative influence on some postgraduates' online learning performances while having a moderate effect on some other postgraduates. This research is significant to understand the causes of learners' PSA, foreign language anxiety and the relationship between speaking anxiety and academic performance.

Keywords: *public speaking anxiety (PSA);* Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)*, online presentation*

1. Introduction

Anxiety is often experienced by humans. According to [42] the emotion of anxiety comes from a perception of threat, a perception informed by symbols, anticipation, and elements of uncertainty. One subarea of anxiety learning is language anxiety. An individual with language anxiety experiences stress, fear, worry, and nervousness [21]. Language anxiety on the other hand, as identified by [54] is a difficulty associated with psychological factors. They include self-belief, reflections along actions and habits when speaking beyond the confine of a classroom setting. The fear of public or public speaking anxiety (PSA) can be experienced by people when they prepare to speak or deliver [46] and is situation-based [3]. Specifically, PSA happens when the individual

speaks in a foreign language or a second language. PSA is usually observed to happen in physical settings like face-to-face classroom environments. Thus, when a speaker is aware of doing a public speaking task, consequently, this requires him or her to be physically and mentally focused in terms of "comprehensiveness of public speaking components, completeness of the content, neatness of delivery, as well as a great deal of expertise and practice" [17]. Therefore, if the preparation is lacking, this will affect their emotion and later cause the speaker to experience anxiety. Apart from a physical conduct of public speaking, the speaker may also experience anxiety in an online presentation.

Throughout the last decades, a great deal of attention has been paid to the study of language anxiety [35]. Studies were conducted on pre-service teachers [22], non-English majors [52], undergraduates and postgraduates [16], international postgraduate students [46] by researchers to explore those who were experiencing language anxiety in speaking a foreign language. Besides, there were also scholars who conducted their studies in teachers' perspectives [12], [35]. These scholars put the emphasis on the factors, reasons, and strategies of language anxiety in the context of the physical situation. However, not too many of them considered foreign or second language speaking anxiety in the online learning context. Thus, additional research on online speaking anxiety among high-level learners is needed to reduce learners' anxiety and help them perform better in their online classes. In fulfilling the research objectives, this study sought to answer the following question: What are the factors of PSA among postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities during online presentations?

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA)

Public Speaking is one of the most feared tasks not only among students but also speakers everywhere [10]. Relatively, individuals will experience a form of anxiety during this setting. The term Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is to measure, as coined by [30], a person's apprehension and nervousness during actual, preempted within a large communicative group. Many researchers studying PSA associated this phenomenon with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) which involved more cognitive-related experiments alongside treatments as part of the research aims [44]. The most common term for PSA as mentioned by [11] is 'stage fright' which not necessarily occurs within a traditional classroom setting of class presentations, but also within group discussions, normal conversations within small or large groups, phone calls and few others.

It has been notable that students experiencing communication apprehension during public speaking has become more apparent. [19] studied engaging virtual reality as part of treatment for PSA and claimed that strong engagement with social media has significantly contributed towards this anxiety. They also noted "social isolation" to be an adverse effect of internet use, not just PSA.

3 Tools to Measure Speaking Anxiety

3.1   Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)

A tool by [33] and [34] which is Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) is used to measure anxiety which can be rated from low (5%) to high anxiety (40%) [53]. Quite similar to Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), PRPSA adopts a Likert scale questionnaire with 34 questions with different codes of constructions - 22 are negative and 12 are positive.

Enlightening research done by [24] comparing anxieties between two groups of students which were freshmen and final year students revealed significant disparities where 14 freshmen experienced low anxiety but 37 for semester-end students and 51 freshmen had high anxiety but only 13 semester-end students fell into the category.

3.2   Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The term "language anxiety" (LA) as quoted by [29, p.27] has much to do with the emotional strain experienced by a person acquiring or utilising the second language . LA has also been associated with several other variables like performance and achievements of language learners and the results obtained were rather conflicting [47]. One thing that can be understood however, that the association between anxiety and language performance is a cyclical process [23]. [23] further elaborated that this is due to the fact that second or foreign language learners who committed mistakes in the process of learning will experience an increase in Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and is a recurrent process.

The studies on language anxiety have developed over the years to investigate variables that could aid or hamper language learning processes. [21] and [41] narrowed three types of anxiety as laid out by psychologists as trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety resonates with individual characters and is very much predisposed to feeling stressed or nervous with any situations they are in [43] as contrast to state anxiety which comes and goes or is intermittent, depending on the time scale or "duration of language learning" [6]. In the context of second language anxiety (SLA) and FLA, [14] as cited in [47] identified them under the umbrella of situation-specific anxiety due to the unique facet a foreign language classroom setting holds, when compared to other academic settings, posits an apparent difference in terms of language use and apprehension.

With that in view, [21] devised a tool called FLCAS to measure whether students' accomplishments are related to FLA [37]. FLCAS consists of 33 items evaluated within a Likert-scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The application of FLCAS is widely adopted by many researchers and has diversified into quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

4 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that has been developed for this research is based on its reference to PSA and adopting two measurements for speaking anxiety which are PRPSA and FLCAS. In understanding PSA for this research, PRPSA questionnaire is

used as a guideline to examine the level of apprehension experienced by the postgraduate students during public presentations. On the other hand, the FLCAS questionnaire is adopted to address situation-specific anxiety, in which this research refers to PSA during online presentations among the students.

Thus, with the understanding of the concepts of PSA along PRPSA and FLCAS, below is the representation of the conceptual framework adopted from the theoretical framework and tools of measurement to answer the research questions (see Fig. 1):
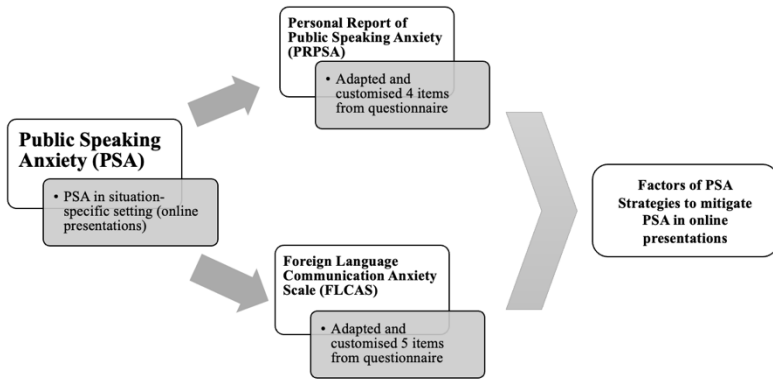
Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework in Measuring PSA adopting PRPSA and FLCAS

5   Methodology

5.1   Research Design and Instruments

The method used in this study was a qualitative study which is to explore the perceptions of speaking anxiety ([41]; p.12) among postgraduate students in online presentations in public universities. To answer the research question, a method of interview has been chosen by the researchers to collect in-depth responses by the interviewees. Qualitative interviews ([7], p. 23) are used as a research method to gain as much insight as possible by constructing questions that align the researcher with the goals of the study, the questions, and the subsequent related questions that may arise. Although past studies adopting PRPSA and FLCAS mostly utilised questionnaires in data collection, this interview method was selected to facilitate the researchers for further clarifications in understanding PSA experienced by the respondents.

In order to collect data from the interviews, a semi-structured approach [36] was used to allow for discussion of the various interview questions. In adopting the tools of PRPSA and FLCAS, an interview protocol has been designed into nine interview questions. The questions were constructed and used to learn as much as possible about postgraduate students' experiences and specific strategies for discussing their

ideas in a structured and natural way in the face of giving a public presentation in an online classroom.

Most of the questions focused on information about students' experiences and strategies when giving public presentations in online classrooms, with only a few about their life as international students and their relationships with classmates of different nationalities. In addition, the last question gave the interviewees space to reflect on their thoughts about online learning in case important information was missed during the interview.

The nine interview questions are of the following classifications ; Four questions adopted and customised based on the original PRPSA questionnaire by [33]; [34] and the other five questions under FLCAS by [21]. Table 1 below is the sample of the original questionnaire along the customised questions for the research:

Table 1. Comparison between original statements from PSA measurement tools and customised questions

Tools	Item Number	Original Statements	Customised Questions
PRPSA	6	I have no fear of giving a speech.	Do you have fears when you do your public speaking / presentation in online classes?
	5	I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up.	What are the main factors / causes that contribute to your fear in public speaking / presentation in online classes?
FLCAS	22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	How do you usually deal with your fear of speaking before and during your online public speaking?
	10	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	Do you think public speaking/ presentation will affect your marks?

5.2   Sampling

This study uses a purposive sampling of three postgraduate students at Malaysian public universities who speak English as a second or foreign language. The criteria chosen for the sampling are of four; the level of study (postgraduate and specifically in PhD), type of university enrolment (public university), demography of university enrolled (Malaysia) and mother tongue (English as a second language or a foreign language). The three participants were postgraduate students from different universities in Malaysia. One of the students was a Malaysian and the other two were international students from China. They all had varying degrees of English as a foreign language experience, so they all experienced speaking anxiety when students gave public presentations in English as the tool of communication.

5.3   Data Collection

All interviews were conducted using video and the audio platform called Zoom. Before starting the interviews, ethical information was again clearly stated to the participants, as well as the purpose of the study and the interviews. In addition, in order to facilitate more accurate and detailed transcription, the interviews were recorded by the *Otter* application of smartphones. Then the researcher would extract preliminary subject data and coding analysis through Nvivo software.

Each interview lasted about 10 to 15 minutes, and all respondents were interviewed individually on Zoom so that they could easily share their thoughts about their online presentations without any interference. This could also help them to express their views on the advantages and disadvantages of speaking online compared to speaking offline. The language medium for the interviews was English, as it is the common and mutually understood language for all participants.

According to [4] there is a necessity to analyze the interview data using thematic analysis method. The linguistic data expressed by the students through the interviews was recorded in the original video form they conducted in English. The researchers used thematic analysis because it was more appropriate to explore psychological variables, such as speaking anxiety. Also, data was triangulated by reverting back to the interviewees post interview for further clarifications.

5.4   Data Analysis

With the analysis of interview information, this paper learns the sources of anxiety and the strategies to deal with anxiety. The interview recordings were transcribed thoroughly, and Nvivo was used to encode classified data. Coding minimizes information while splitting data into study units and coding-related classifications [8]. The subject analysis method was used and thematic analysis employed. Thematic analysis, according to [8] is a qualitative research method that uses a set of systematic procedures to induce and deduce the category of a phenomenon. Its primary goal is to clarify a phenomenon and find solutions by recognizing the fundamental codes of the phenomenon and then classifying those codes concerning the context and process of analysis. Therefore, this method is the most appropriate to systematically dissect the data obtained from the interviews.

The initial information stemmed from the subjects' understanding of speaking anxiety, which was then reduced to study devices based on general subjects by examining the participants' language instances. These units are arranged right into ideal headings, such as "language proficiency," "analysis from others," "peer pressure," and "crashes." Figure 2 below showcases a sample of interview codes extracted using Nvivo on factors of PSA.

Fig. 2. Interview Codes for Factors of PSA

6 Results

The interview transcriptions have allowed the researchers to answer the research question. It is firstly paramount to understand the background of the respondents before analysing their experience on PSA. Table 2 below represents the demographic background of the three interviewees for the study. The variables represent their nationality, university of study, study programme and age.

Table 2. Demographic background of interviewees

Student	Nationality	University (Degree)	Program	Age
Student N	Malaysia	UUM (PhD)	Applied Linguistics	30
Student Z	China	UPM (PhD)	English Language	40
Student C	China	UPM (PhD)	English Language	31

6.1 Factors of PSA among Postgraduate Students in Online Presentations

Anxiety is more than a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Many possible factors lead to PSA [20]. The local student from Malaysia (Student N) and the international students from China (Student C and Student Z) have expressed their influencing factors in their online speeches which causes speech anxiety. To answer the research question which is to identify the factors of PSA among postgraduate students during online presentations, the researchers have identified six significant factors or reasons. They include the restraint of the classroom environment, fear of oral expression, fear of mistakes and evaluation, fear of English lecturers, self-related cognition and self-perception, fear of not using the accurate pronunciation, fear of not using the correct grammar, and fear of not using the correct vocabulary. The reasons for their anxiety can be further classified as follow:

Fear of Negative Evaluation   The respondents stated that fear of negative comments from teachers and classmates was a prominent concern and a significant cause of anxiety. They are afraid of being corrected in public, especially of feeling humiliated if these remarks are accompanied by disparagement. They also pay too much attention to others' opinions and have concerns about their comments. For example, Student C noted,

"When we speak English, we will mention that 'I'm a Ph.D. student'. And maybe your students, friends, parents and relatives will think that since now you are of that level, your English must be very good. So, you must control yourself to speak English fluently. So, if I make some mistakes in English, I'm afraid of some evaluations from my peers, from my doctors or from my classmates."

(Student C)

"I think one factor is the evaluation from my classmates or my supervisor."

(Student Z)

Fear of Speech Inaccuracies.   According to [15], the fear of making mistakes is strongly related to students' concerns. The findings of this research mirror a study by [39] where they revealed that 65 percent of Pashto-speaking students fear to make mistakes during public speaking. One common concern that Chinese and Malaysian students have in their class is that they will worry of saying the wrong words and failing to find the accurate ones. They avoid speaking not because they fear negative comments from their teachers and classmates, but because they like to use correct sentences with different structures which require vast mental vocabulary and good understanding of grammar. One of the interviewees mentioned,

"You know, as a Chinese international student, maybe I'm good at writing or reading. But for my output ability, I mean speaking abilities are not so good. For example, now, I don't know how to express my ideas. My speaking skill is not as good as my other English skills. Maybe, I cannot do a good presentation."

(Student C)

In addition, when asked about forgetting vocabulary and grammar, one respondent mentioned that,

"Because English is not my mother tongue. I cannot showcase myself naturally and fluently to express my real ideas."

(Student Z)

It is worth mentioning that the Chinese student also said that her listening ability is also a factor causing anxiety when speaking in English. In the interview, the student clearly said,

"If you have poor listening ability, you will have speaking anxiety. This is because if you communicate with others first, you will catch the idea."

(Student Z)

Peer Pressure. According to [2], a highly confident person is more likely to achieve positive and successful results. The respondents from China mention that lack of confidence or self-esteem were potential factors, and that they would suddenly become less confident when giving a public speech, which could lead to PSA. Specifically, one respondent mentioned,

"Some of my classmates come from different nationalities, I mean, their oral abilities are better than mine."

(Student C)

In addition, the Malaysian student also discussed that high confidence can lead to positive results in cases of language difficulties. For example, she revealed in the interview,

"So with such a mindset together with preparation that I have made before and during (presentation), I believe that it will make myself prepared mentally and physically, even though it is just for the online presentation."

(Student N)

This reflects that students do their own psychological construction to increase their confidence in their expression, so as to reduce the expression pressure possibly deriving from other excellent students. She further elaborated,

"I would say that during the presence of public speaking, I let myself know that I am like the master of the topic."

(Student N)

This indicates that the perception of students on their English speaking ability becomes the root of their anxiety.

Fear of Educators' Accents. The results suggest that incorrect pronunciation is one of the sources of students' anxiety. That is, if listeners cannot recognize the speakers' accents, they will be stressed when trying to understand the speakers. One interviewee commented,

"The only worry is when I do not understand the teachers' accent, I cannot understand the teachers. I don't have to worry about the teachers' negative evaluations. I just worry that I cannot understand them."

(Student Z)

This proves that comprehension problems are integral among students who learn English as a second or foreign language and have very much impacted their PSA.

6.2   Further Findings: Influences on Online Learning Performances

Among these participants, online public speaking anxiety performed differently in different online learning situations [46]. Online learning performances are a prescriptive

combination of scores that come from the students' assignments, exams, group work, etc. [50]. For international postgraduate students, their final marks of group discussion, class participation, communication with supervisors or lecturers can be regarded as a result of their online learning performances.

Marks and Evaluation. Among these three interviewees, only student C believes that public speaking anxiety may influence students' marks due to less opportunity to impress their lecturers. Students N and Z take a different view from student C and do not consider PSA as a factor affecting students' class performance. However, student N and student Z have different reasons for their reasoning. One of the respondents said,

"... I have been engaging with the second language for years. So, I would say that I'm very much comfortable using it."

(Student N)

However, student Z claimed that marks are not that important if the speech were well-designed, logical, and clearly presented.

Peer Communication. Group discussion and other group work always involve peer communication with a second language for international students. In the opinion of student Z, this is a friendly and relaxing process without too much pressure. On the contrary, student C chose to keep silent in a group that needs to work with a second or foreign language due to the speaking anxiety caused by lower language proficiency. She mentioned,

"But after the meeting, if I really want to express myself, I will write something and send it to our WhatsApp group."

(Student C)

Student N on the other hand pointed that her speaking anxiety comes from a communication dilemma among the higher and lower language level students.

Class Participation. In the class, students may face dozens of peers who are in the same language and academic levels. In this regard, some students feel anxious when they try to participate in class activities, especially those who are at an insufficient level. One of the participants mentioned,

"I don't want to be evaluated by my peers".

(Student Z)

Student C selects another solution to deal with her anxiety, that is, to keep silent during class. This is because she believes that her fluency level is lower as compared to her peers. To prove this, she mentioned in the interview;

"I'm not the one who is good at speaking. So, during class, I always keep silent. Sometimes I really want to answer my teachers' questions. But maybe if there's another student who speaks more fluently than me, I will just keep silent and be a listener again."

(Student C)

Therefore, her reflection of her fluency level has greatly affected her PSA.

Communication with Supervisors. Interaction with supervisors is also a significant aspect for postgraduates. Some students contact their supervisors through emails or communication applications like *WhatsApp.* However, due to limited ability in conversing in English, one of the interviewees said,

"If my supervisor wanted to listen to my ideas face to face, I can do that. But, I think that will have a little influence on my anxiety or I will leave a bad impression on my supervisor."

(Student C)

On the contrary, there is no such anxiety for student Z for the reason that she believed it is normal to make mistakes in front of her teachers. This is due to her cognitive understanding that the supervisory level is higher. The only factor that makes her nervous is her supervisor's accent.

Below is the summary of results on perceptions on online learning, causes of speaking anxiety, strategy used by interviewees and influences of the three interviewees.
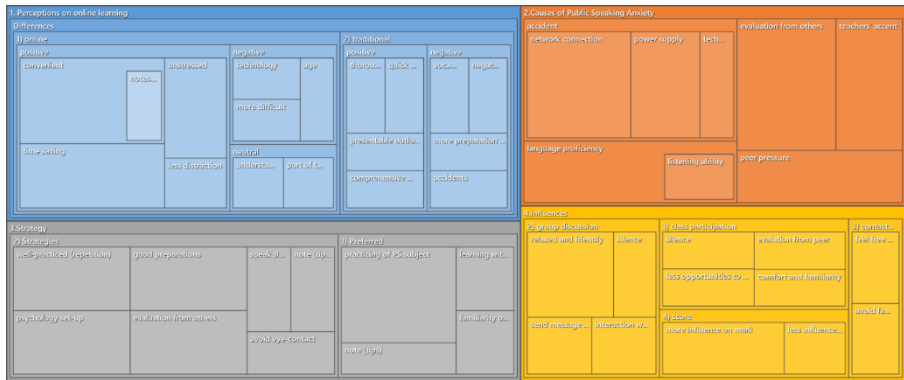
Fig. 3. Summary of results on perceptions on online learning, causes of speaking anxiety, strategy used by interviewees and influences

7 Discussions

7.1 Factors of PSA among Postgraduate Students in Online Presentations

In a word, formal classroom conditions support the finding from previous studies that students feel more anxious in second or foreign language classes because their performance is continuously observed by their instructors and friends [32]; [38]. Students should be informed that mistakes and being corrected by teachers during learning are common phenomena. [5] suggests that this can be done verbally or nonverbally by teachers to build students' self-confidence again. Besides, students lack vocabulary items, and they cannot remember words to express their desired views. Their knowledge of making sentences using proper words is inferior. For this matter, the condition can easily cause them to feel confused and uncomfortable to do presentations even in front of a small number of audience due to anxiety that they experience [45]. Students should read English newspapers, where they have the opportunity to learn words, which is very helpful in acquiring new words and improving cognitive abilities. At the same time, speaking anxiety has a positive side because if students want to improve themselves to compete with others, they will focus more on speaking skills to improve their English oral expression. Moreover, this also improves students' awareness of having confidence and thus encourages them to improve their speaking goals [48]. Students' mentality and opposing views on themselves are the reasons for the lack of confidence in speaking. The findings suggest that friendly and informal classroom environments can cause less anxiety.

7.2   Influences of PSA among Postgraduate Students

From the semi-structured interview, it was found that PSA had a significantly negative influence on some postgraduates' online learning performances while having a moderate effect on some other postgraduates.

7.3   Negative Effects on Online Learning Performance

Students may keep silent or use the written form to communicate with their classmates or teachers. For those who have a negative influence, peer pressure, others' evaluation, language proficiency (including vocabulary, speaking, and listening) and accents afford the main anxiety of online learning [35]. Besides, they also tend to develop fear to only use correct grammar, vocabulary even when conversing with their teachers during speaking tasks [46]. Therefore, they choose the written form to give themselves time to identify the answer. One interesting point is that one Malaysian postgraduate student feels anxious while communicating with lower-level language users. On the contrary, the fear of the other two Chinese postgraduates originates from their higher-level peers. This could be due to the avoidance of being judged by their peers who are expected to be at the same level as them. Like what [12] claimed, lack of confidence and self-esteem might be the reason for the hesitation of communicating among peers.

7.4   Moderate Effect on Online Learning Performance

Interestingly, language anxiety decreases when some postgraduates communicate with a higher-level language ability supervisor. This might be explained by [46] finding that positive feedback can reduce the PSA of students. Their language deficiency is no longer a key influence on their performances while communicating with supervisors but accents. As [46] concluded, cultural differences might cause communication anxiety. Also, peer communication tends to be a natural and easy situation for some postgraduates. It is worth noting that the performances of students with a higher language literacy are consistent in different settings.

8 Conclusion

This research conducted a semi-structured interview to explore the main causes of PSA among international postgraduates in Malaysia. The findings also revealed the influences of PSA on international postgraduates' online learning performances. The research showed that negative evaluation, language proficiency, peer pressure, teachers' accents are the main factors leading to PSA. For higher-level language proficiency international students, PSA did not affect their class performances too much except for communicating with lower language speaking group members. These lower-level students chose the written form to mitigate their PSA during the class. In the current study, there is a cross-cultural difference between Malaysian and Chinese international postgraduates from UUM and UPM in the main causes and online learning performances due to their language proficiency.

This study figured out some new causes of international students' PSA in the online context, such as teachers' accents and online accidents (including electricity problems and networks). These new causes arise with the transformation of learning places and shift of learning approach. Future studies can choose to focus on male post graduates or postgraduates from hard science disciplines. The sample size of the current study is too small to reach data saturation and be representative. Larger sample size may also provide different results on the differences between Malaysian and Chinese international postgraduates. This study will provide implications for international postgraduates and their teachers in and out of the classroom communication. Gentler and more encouraging feedback from the teacher could mitigate the PSA of postgraduates. Also, the students could also self-regulate themselves through some strategies like slower speech, practicing, and preparation.

Acknowledgements

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