



Intercultural Competence and Academic Development in Study Exchange Program between Germany & Namibia: Mixed-Methods Evidence from Baden-Wuerttemberg and Windhoek

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Abstract

The study aims to showcase that as study exchange mobility is often assumed to enhance intercultural competence and academic development while contributing to sustainable partnerships. Yet empirical research on intercultural competences through study exchange mobility between Germany and Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. Using a mixed method approach the article presents findings from a study conducted in 2024 in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and Windhoek (Namibia). A survey was carried out among 122 students and qualitative interviews with a total of 11 International Offices under the themes: motivation for study exchange, academic development, intercultural competence and support systems. The results indicate both promising opportunities and persistent challenges, that is the importance of structured academic engagement and sustainable institutional frameworks. The study adds to the under-researched field of Germany–Africa exchange and provides insights into how mobility can be better aligned with developmental and educational goals.

Keywords: student exchange, intercultural competence, academic development, education partnerships.

1 Introduction

Studying abroad represents a significant life transition for students. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, international student mobility has increased at a rapid pace. As of 2022–2023, there are about 6.6–6.9 million international students studying abroad (UNESCO, 2023, p.15). With an increase in international student enrolments from 416,437 (2020/21) to 469,485 (2023/24), Germany remains a top destination (DAAD & DZHW, 2024, p. 8). The number of international students has more than tripled over the last 20 years in Baden-Württemberg, one of Germany's most research-intensive federal states, which also reflects this upward trend (Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts Baden-Württemberg [MWK], n.d.)

Even with these rapid developments, there is still a dearth of scholarship on academic exchange with Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the current research focuses on international North-North exchanges or African students attending European universities, despite their political and developmental importance, partnerships between German and African universities have received little empirical attention (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 97; de Wit & Jones, 2022, pp. 3–12).

An important and little-researched case is Namibia. The higher education sector is small, and mobility opportunities are concentrated in a small number of universities, most notably the International University of Management (IUM), Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), and the University of Namibia (UNAM). Furthermore, in this study the exchange programs have a special cultural and political dimension because of Namibia's historical ties to Germany, which stem from its colonial past from 1884 to 1915 (Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010). While German partners like the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) typically frame mobility primarily as an opportunity for personal growth, intercultural exposure, and curriculum internationalisation, Namibian institutions place an emphasis on exchange as a way to strengthen employability and contribute to national development strategies (UNAM, 2024).

Against this background, a key research problem arises: although Germany-Namibia student exchanges are institutionally supported and politically meaningful, there is little systematic evidence on their impact on students' academic development and intercultural competence. The aim is therefore to explore: (1) how exchange programs affect students' learning and intercultural outcomes, (2) how universities organize and support these exchanges, and (3) how partnerships can be designed for long-term sustainability.

2 Theoretical Framework

In the cultural adjustment process, international students face many challenges such as, sense of loss when adjusting to a new culture, culture shock, adjusting to a new educational system, lack of social support, and alienation from domestic students. Bochner (1972) sees the international student as needing to attain adjustment to four different roles, as a foreigner with special cultural learning problems, as a student adjusting to the stress common to all beginning students as a maturing, developing person concerned about purposes, meanings and goals; and as a national representative sensitive about his or her ethnic background and national status. Study exchange mobility has long been studied through different theoretical lenses, yet no single perspective fully explains its complex dynamics. To analyze the Germany–Namibia exchange, it is necessary to integrate approaches that capture both the motivations for mobility, the benefits it is expected to generate, the processes through which students learn across cultures, and the institutional conditions that make such programs sustainable.

A starting point is the classical push–pull framework, which remains widely used to explain why students choose to study abroad. Push factors, such as limited opportunities at home or constrained funding, interact with pull factors, including academic reputation, employability prospects, or cultural attractions abroad (Maringe & Carter, 2007, pp. 459–475; Chen & Zimitat, 2006, pp. 91–100). In the African context, mobility is frequently justified to enhance competitiveness and address capacity shortages (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014, p. 187). For Namibia, this perspective resonates with institutional narratives that frame exchange as contributing directly to national development strategies.

Yet while the push–pull model offers valuable insights into motivations, it cannot fully explain what students gain once they participate in mobility program. Whoever this is where human and social capital theories provide an important explanation. Human capital theory views education as an investment in knowledge and skills that increase productivity and employability (Becker, 2002). Sen’s (1999, pp. 18–19) capability approach further stresses that education expands the freedoms individuals must achieve valued life outcomes, which is particularly relevant in contexts where development agendas are central. At the same time, social capital perspectives emphasize the role of networks, norms, and trust in generating resources (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249; Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Study Exchange mobility can thus be seen not only as a means of individual skill acquisition but also as a generator of “bridging capital” across cultural and institutional boundaries, creating opportunities for professional advancement and institutional collaboration (Marginson, 2014, p. 15). Recent studies show that the value of exchange for career and institutional outco

mes is often realized through these networks rather than through formal qualifications alone (Li & Bray, 2007, p. 795).

However, motivation and capital perspectives do not fully capture how students navigate cultural difference, intercultural competence theory addresses this dimension whereby Deardorff (2006, p. 247) defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures, grounded in attitudes (openness, respect), knowledge (self-awareness, cultural understanding), and skills (interpretation, adaptability). Therefore, evaluating an individual's intercultural competence involves describing and occasionally quantifying what they can do in circumstances where their social or cultural identities are prominent (Byram, 1997). Importantly, intercultural competence is not automatically acquired through immersion. Meta-analyses indicate that structured pedagogical interventions—such as pre-departure training, guided reflection, and mentoring—are decisive for intercultural learning (Goldstein et al., 2022, p. 5). Recent research in *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* further shows that even short-term exchanges can enhance intercultural outcomes if embedded in intentional curricula (Nolan, 2024, p. 2; Wickline et al., 2020, p. 61).

The concept of academic development, which connects cognitive and individual learning outcomes, is closely related to intercultural competency. King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003, p. 230) stress that studying overseas can develop critical thinking, independence, and problem-solving skills in addition to subject knowledge. More recent research supports these conclusions by defining academic development as including both formal accomplishments (grades, credit transfer etc.) and more general educational development (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 121). Thus, academic development serves as a link between the theories of intercultural competence, which emphasizes relational and communicative learning, and human capital, which emphasises skills and employability.

Finally, the sustainability of study mobility programs depends on institutional contexts. Partnerships that are not embedded in formal structures often collapse when individual champions leave. As de Wit & Jones (2022) argue, sustainable partnerships require institutionalization through agreements, resource allocation, and mutual commitment. In Sub-Saharan contexts, asymmetries in funding and infrastructure mean that sustainability must be explicitly addressed if partnerships are to be reciprocal rather than extractive (Teferra, 2019, p. 11). This institutional dimension is essential in the Germany–Namibia case, where partnerships balance the bureaucratic formalization of German universities with the resource constraints but high motivation of Namibian partners.

Taken together, these theories form an integrated framework. Push–pull models explain why students enter exchange; human and social capital theories clarify the benefits expected; intercultural competence theory describes the mechanisms of learning across cultural difference; academic development bridges cognitive and

intercultural gains; and sustainability perspectives highlight the institutional scaffolding required to translate individual outcomes into long-term cooperation. This integration provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the outcomes of student exchange between Germany and Namibia.

Derived Research Questions

From this integrated framework, the following overarching research question arises:

How do study exchange programs between Germany and Namibia shape students' academic development and intercultural competence, and how are such programs structured and sustained by universities?

To answer this, three specific research questions are formulated:

1. What motivations drive students to participate in Germany–Namibia study exchange programs, and how do these relate to expected academic and intercultural outcomes?
2. How do students perceive the effects of study exchange on their academic development and intercultural competence?
3. How do universities in Germany and Namibia organize and support study exchange, and what strategies are employed to ensure sustainable partnerships?

Based on the theoretical framework, three hypotheses are proposed for empirical testing:

H1: Higher levels of cultural integration are positively associated with greater intercultural understanding.

H2: Higher levels of cultural integration are positively associated with better outcomes in academic development.

H3: Better outcomes in academic development are positively associated with greater intercultural understanding.

3 Methodology

This study applied a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data from students with qualitative interviews from International Office (IO) representatives in both Germany and Namibia.

Sampling and Access

The student survey was distributed to all students at DHBW and partner institutions in Namibia ((NUST and UNAM) who had completed a study semester abroad during the past three years. This constitutes a purposive sampling strategy, since only students with direct exchange experience were eligible to participate. In total, N = 122 students completed the questionnaire.

For the qualitative component, a total of 11 interviews were conducted with International Office staff from Duale Hochschule Baden Württemberg which is one university that has various locations in Baden-Württemberg (Karlsruhe, Lörrach, Ravensburg, Mannheim, Heilbronn, Heidenheim, Villingen-Schwenningen, Stuttgart, and the DHBW presidency) and with representatives from Namibia that is Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) which is private university and University of Namibia (UNAM) which is a government university(NUST). As much as DHBW has a lot of locations they collectively share partnership of universities in Africa and hence Namibia. These two universities in Namibia are major partner universities for all the DHBW locations in Germany hence all these locations send their students for study exchange their and vice versa.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire was developed around four core areas, each derived from the theoretical framework (push-pull, human/social capital, intercultural competence, academic development):

- Sociodemographic data (age, gender, study level, field of study, year of exchange)
- Motivations and program characteristics (reasons for mobility, program duration, funding sources, first information channels).
- Cultural integration and intercultural understanding (preparedness for cultural differences, orientation programs, experiences of misunderstandings, perception of host community, tolerance, respect, and intercultural activities).
- Academic and personal development (gains in academic knowledge and skills, independence, problem-solving, communication skills, career prospects, and network building).

The questionnaire also included an open-ended section, asking students to describe one particularly positive and one negative experience and to suggest improvements to exchange structures. These qualitative responses complemented the statistical data and provided additional insights into intercultural challenges and learning.

Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide was developed in line with the same theoretical considerations, ensuring compatibility with the student survey. It included themes such as:

- Institutional aims and criteria for partnerships.
- Processes for initiating and maintaining partnerships.
- Challenges in partnership management (e.g., funding, bureaucracy, asymmetries).
- Orientation and support programs for incoming and outgoing student

- Measures to foster intercultural competence (e.g., language courses, cultural events, buddy systems).
- Strategies for sustainability and long-term reciprocity.

This ensured that the interviews not only provided descriptive accounts of practice but also directly addressed the dimensions highlighted in the literature (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Deardorff, 2006; de Wit & Jones, 2022).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and bivariate correlation analyses (Pearson's r). The statistical analyses tested the three hypotheses by calculating:

- Correlation coefficients (r)
- Significance levels (p)
- Effect sizes (following Cohen's conventions for small, medium, and large effects)

This enabled examination of associations between cultural integration, academic development, and intercultural understanding.

Qualitative data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015; Kuckartz, 2018). The content-structuring analysis was applied, combining deductive categories derived from theory (e.g., motivations, academic outcomes, intercultural competence, sustainability) with inductive codes that emerged from the interview transcripts. Coding and categorization enabled identification of patterns in how institutions perceive exchange and manage partnerships.

Integration of Methods

The two data sources were triangulated to strengthen validity: quantitative findings provided evidence for statistical associations, while qualitative interviews explained mechanisms and contextual conditions. For instance, correlations between cultural integration and intercultural understanding were deepened through interview statements about orientation programs and communication practices. Similarly, survey results on academic development were contextualized with institutional narratives about credit transfer and program duration.

4 Results

4.1 Motivations for Exchange: Personal and Professional Drivers

The survey data show that students identified multiple drivers for participating in study exchange, ranging from personal growth and intercultural experience to career

prospects and academic advancement. The relative importance of these motivations varied, but overall both professional and personal drivers were present.

Qualitative interviews reflect this dual orientation. German coordinators often emphasized that students value exchange primarily as a transformative personal experience, while Namibian representatives stressed that exchange is strongly tied to employability and broader national development goals.

It is important to note that the results are not disaggregated by German and Namibian respondents. A comparative analysis by nationality is beyond the scope of this article and will be addressed in future work.

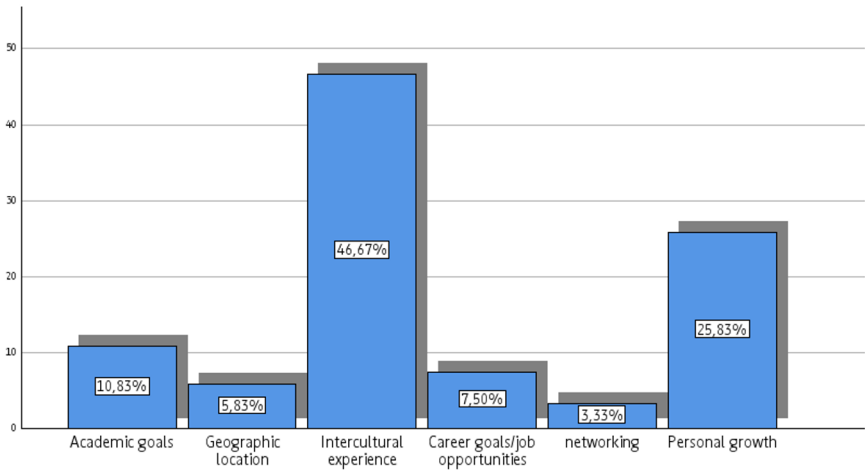


Fig. 1. Main motivation for exchange, own survey (N=122)

4.2 Academic Development: Learning Gains and Structural Constraints

Quantitative results show that students reported gains in academic knowledge and skills, but also highlighted structural limitations. Mean values suggest moderate to high agreement with statements that exchange contributed to academic learning, while self-reported independence and problem-solving scored even higher (see Fig. 2)

Correlation analysis further indicates that cultural integration is positively related to academic development ($r \approx .29, p < .01$), supporting the theoretical assumption that integration processes influence academic outcomes.

Qualitative interviews add depth to these findings. German respondents emphasized that institutional structures, particularly the dual-study system with short academic

cycles, limit the extent to which students can engage academically during exchange. Namibian respondents stressed that exchange opens access to facilities and teaching methods otherwise unavailable, but that funding delays and administrative challenges reduce the potential impact.

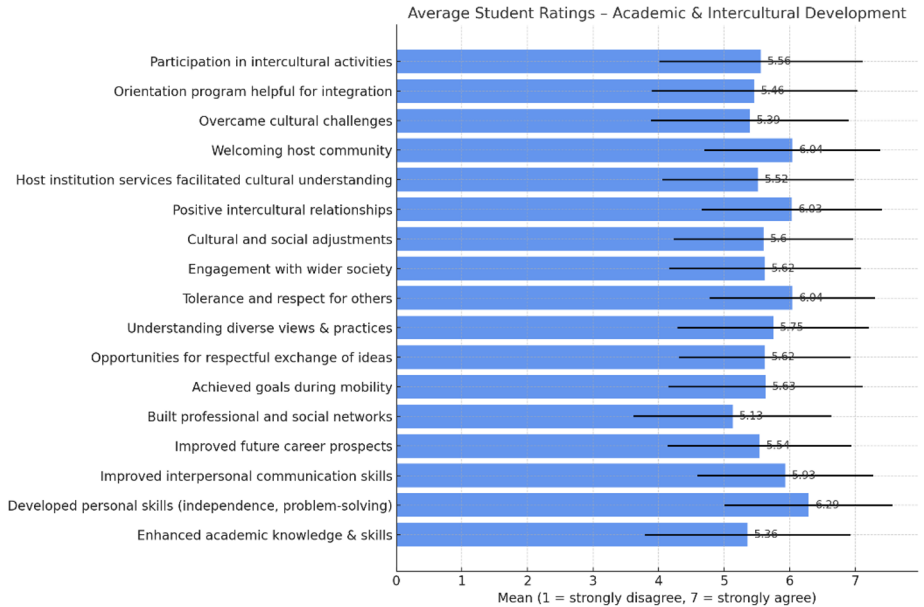


Fig. 2. Academic & Intercultural Development, own survey (N=122)

4.3 Intercultural Competence: Integration as a Pathway to Understanding

The quantitative results provide strong evidence for the relationship between intercultural competence and both cultural integration and academic development. The correlation analyses demonstrate that cultural integration is significantly associated with intercultural understanding ($r \approx .51$, $p < .001$) and that academic development is even more strongly associated with intercultural understanding ($r \approx .71$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that intercultural competence is not merely a by-product of social interaction, but is closely tied to the degree of academic engagement and reflection during the exchange.

Qualitative data deepen this perspective. German coordinators frequently highlighted that students experience a “mirror effect” abroad, whereby they learn to see their own cultural norms from the outside and return with a more nuanced self-understanding. Namibian staff, by contrast, stressed the importance of structured preparation before students go abroad, emphasizing that unaddressed cultural misunderstandings can quickly escalate and negatively impact the learning experience.

Both perspectives align with Deardorff's (2006, p. 247) process model of intercultural competence, which frames attitudes, knowledge, and skills as interdependent elements that develop through intentional interventions.

The findings also point to the limits of spontaneous integration. While students who report high levels of social and cultural immersion also demonstrate stronger intercultural understanding, interviewees consistently noted that pre-departure training, buddy programs, and mentoring systems are crucial to translate everyday encounters into actual intercultural learning. This corresponds with recent empirical work showing that reflection and scaffolding are necessary conditions for intercultural competence to emerge (Goldstein et al., 2022, p. 5; Wickline et al., 2020, p. 61).

Taken together, the results highlight that intercultural competence is both an outcome and a process: it develops when cultural integration is paired with academic challenge and institutional support.

4.4 Institutional Logics and Sustainability: Reciprocity under Constraint

While student-level data underline individual learning gains, the interviews with International Offices reveal the systemic conditions that determine the sustainability of exchange. A recurring theme across the interviews was reciprocity. German coordinators emphasized that partnerships are only considered successful if they involve a balanced flow of sending and receiving students. Namibian staff, however, pointed out that reciprocity is not simply numerical but must also consider how mobility supports national development priorities, such as skills transfer, employability, and curricular enhancement.

R1: *“A corporation can only be sustainable if both partners get something out of it. It doesn't have to be the same. For example, we have a corporation where we send our students for a study term and the partner sends their students for work placements. So, it doesn't have to be the same type of mobility, but both partners get something out of it according to their request. So, the best corporations are those where its not a one-way situation”.*

R2: *“A corporation can only be sustainable if both partners get something out of it. It doesn't have to be the same. For example, we have a corporation where we send our students for a study term and the partner sends their students for work placements. So, it doesn't have to be the same type of mobility, but both partners get something out of it according to their request. So the best corporations are those where its not a one-way situation”.*

The interviews also pointed to the fragility of partnerships that depend on the initiative of single individuals. Several respondents noted that when a committed coordinator leaves, collaborations often weaken or collapse. This confirms findings in the literature that emphasize the necessity of institutionalization to ensure long-term

sustainability (de Wit & Jones, 2022, p.359). Formal agreements, co-funded structures, and shared evaluation mechanisms were mentioned as essential conditions for sustaining cooperation.

R3: *“So the more people you know personally at a partner, the better its working. And the same, we always welcome visitors from abroad if they come to see us and then they can also meet the faculty and we can talk about maybe challenges, we can talk about the successes of the corporation. So a personal relationship in my perspective is one of the success factors of a corporation. And I also saw it in my office time that some of the corporations just died out when the people retired”.*

Resource asymmetries emerged as another critical factor. Namibian representatives explained that while partnerships with German institutions are attractive due to financial support, they sometimes conflict with Namibia’s need to set its own higher education agenda. German partners, in turn, pointed to bureaucratic hurdles and rigid program structures that hinder flexibility in accommodating African partners. This echoes Teferra’s (2019, p. 11) argument that many North–South partnerships risk reinforcing dependency if sustainability is not explicitly addressed.

In sum, the findings indicate that while exchange programs provide valuable individual benefits, their long-term impact depends on whether institutions succeed in embedding partnerships in formal structures, aligning them with national and institutional priorities, and addressing asymmetries in resources and expectations. Without such measures, the sustainability of Germany–Namibia exchanges remains precarious.

5 Discussion and Recommendations

While the study affirms that student exchanges between Namibia and Germany have a significant positive impact on intercultural competence and academic growth, it also draws attention to ongoing institutional and structural issues that play a role in the mobility process. Motivators for mobility demonstrate the applicability of push-pull theory by reflecting both employability and personal development. Although results are limited by inflexible program structures and recognition issues, academic development remains consistent with human capital approaches. The intercultural competence theory is supported by the strong correlation between academic growth and intercultural understanding, highlighting the importance of preparedness and guided reflection. According to sustainability theory, institutional sustainability relies primarily on reciprocity and formal anchoring than on individual initiative program

Building on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed, structured by temporal horizon:

Short-term (within 1–2 years)

- Strengthen preparation programs: Introduce mandatory pre-departure workshops and intercultural training sessions for outgoing students, and structured orientation and buddy systems for incoming students.
- Streamline administration: Simplify credit recognition procedures and ensure that students receive timely confirmation of learning agreements to avoid bureaucratic delays.

Medium-term (3–5 years)

- Integrate academic and intercultural learning: Link exchange with specific academic tasks (e.g., joint projects, reflective assignments) that explicitly foster intercultural competence. Courses should be co-designed by German and Namibian faculty to bridge perspectives.
- Institutionalize reciprocity: Move beyond individual coordinators by embedding partnerships into official agreements, joint curricula, and evaluation frameworks. Reciprocity should not only be measured in numbers of mobile students but also in mutual academic gains and curriculum development.

Long-term (5–10 years)

- Align with strategic development goals: Ensure that exchanges are systematically linked to Namibia's national higher education and development strategies, and to Germany's internationalization policies. Establish joint funding lines that guarantee stability across political cycles and reduce dependency on individual project funding.
- Build sustainable infrastructures: Create dedicated exchange offices or units in partner institutions with secure funding, enabling long-term continuity. Regular joint evaluations should be conducted to adapt programs to changing contexts and ensure equitable benefit-sharing.

6 Conclusion

This study has examined student exchange between Germany and Namibia through a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data from 122 students with 11 interviews from International Office representatives. The findings show that exchange fosters both academic development and intercultural competence, though structural and institutional barriers continue to limit the full potential of such programs. Academic and intercultural learning reinforce each other, but require deliberate preparation, guided reflection, and supportive frameworks. At the institutional level, sustainability is closely tied to reciprocity, formalization, and alignment with broader strategic goals.

The recommendations derived from this research highlight three-time horizons for action. In the short term, universities should focus on strengthening preparation and support systems and reducing administrative obstacles. In the medium term, exchange must be better integrated into curricula and reciprocity institutionalized beyond individual coordinators. In the long term, programs should be strategically aligned with national and institutional development priorities and supported by sustainable infrastructures.

Critical Reflection

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the quantitative results do not differentiate between Namibian and German students; while this article has highlighted general patterns, future work should examine these groups separately to capture asymmetries more precisely. Second, the qualitative data relied on International Office representatives' experience, which provided valuable institutional insights but excluded other crucial voices. Professors directly involved in exchange programs—through teaching, supervision, or research collaboration—were not systematically interviewed. Their perspectives on academic integration, curricular innovation, and long-term sustainability could enrich the analysis. Third, access to Namibian universities was challenging, limiting the breadth of perspectives from the Global South. This reflects the very structural asymmetries discussed in the findings and underscores the importance of building research collaborations that are more inclusive and reciprocal.

Finally, as with many studies relying on self-reported survey data, the findings capture students' perceptions rather than objective learning outcomes. Future research should complement surveys with performance-based measures of intercultural competence and longitudinal designs that track graduates' employability and career trajectories.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to an under-researched field by providing empirical evidence on Germany–Namibia student exchange program. Its central message is clear: such programs can significantly enhance academic development and intercultural competence, but only if they are intentionally designed, structurally embedded, and sustainably supported.

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