Digital transport in and for society

Focus Group Guidelines Subtask 3.1.3

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Executive summary

This document is part of WP3: Pilot Demonstrations of the Dignity project. As part of task 3.1: Framing the digital gap in mobility, the Dignity pilot regions are expected to organise a focus group with vulnerable-to-exclusion groups, to validate the results of previous research steps. This document guides the pilot regions in the organisation of this focus group. These guidelines are divided into four chapters: the first chapter is an introduction of the place of the focus group in the Digntiy project and its goal. In the second chapter, the theoretical background of the methodology is explored, after which specific guidelines for the Dignity focus group are provided in the next two chapters. Chapter three contains tips for the practical organisation of the focus group, while chapter four gives an overview of the intended content of the focus group. Together, these guidelines enable the Dignity pilot regions to effectively organise the task 3.1.3 focus groups with vulnerable-to-exclusion groups.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Position within the Dignity project

The Dignity project consists of six work packages. These guidelines are part of work package 3: pilot demonstrations. The aim of this work package is to put the Dignity approach to the test in the four pilot regions/cities within the project: Ancona (Italy), Barcelona (Spain), Flanders (Belgium) and Tilburg (The Netherlands). The first task, 3.1, of work package 3 is to frame the digital gap in mobility in each pilot region. A combination of several methods is developed and implemented to frame this digital gap:

- **Digital gap self-assessment**: desk research to fill in a framework aimed at bringing together information about the digital gap on three levels (micro, meso, macro). Data from the **Dignity survey** fielded in each pilot region is used to complete the information on the micro level.
- **Customer journey mapping**: getting insights in how vulnerable-to-exclusion groups experience their daily trips.
- **Workshop with vulnerable-to-exclusion groups**: a focus group to validate the results from the previous two steps.

These guidelines focus on the practical organisation and content of the workshop with vulnerable-to-exclusion groups, referenced to as subtask 3.1.3 in the Dignity project timeline. Since the workshop with vulnerable-to-exclusion groups is based on focus group theory and to make a clear distinction with other Dignity workshops, the term 'focus group' will be used hereafter instead of 'workshop'. When talking about the focus group in these guidelines, we thus mean subtask 3.1.3.

1.2 Goal of the focus group

The goal of the focus group is primarily to **discuss and validate** the results from the digital gap self-assessment, the survey and the customer journey mapping. The content will be based on the data collected during these previous steps. The questions during the focus group will be constructed depending on the extent to how the results of the different steps overlap with each other. It's important to stress that it's not necessary to collect new data during this focus group, but rather to validate the results from previous steps. This will help us better understand and contextualise these results from a research perspective. Given that the results from the rest of the framing phase will have a defining influence, the content of the focus group will differ in each pilot. In chapter four it's displayed what this specifically means for how you, as a pilot, should give content to your focus group.

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2. Focus group

2.1 Theory

Within the Dignity project, we perceive and refer to the workshops intended for the targeted vulnerable-to-exclusion groups as a focus group. A focus group is a well-known **qualitative research method** already established as a long-term tradition boasting various proven merits. Before going into the practical guidelines for the organization and content of the focus group, we'll give a broad overview of the theoretical background of focus group research. We intend for this approach to clarify the decision as to why this workshop/focus group will be included as part of the framing phase within the Dignity project.

Like in-depth interviews or participant observation, the focus group is a qualitative form of data collection that can be used in various research settings. In essence, during a focus group a small selection of people is assembled to discuss a specific topic. However, this doesn't mean that a focus group can be considered as a group interview. There is an inherent interactive nature to a focus group that makes it distinct from a series of individual interviews or even a group interview. During a (group) interview, the researcher is primarily, often only, interested in the responses that participants give to the researcher's questions. While this is also important during a focus group, here the **group interaction and dynamics** are also explicitly part the research interest. In this sense, interaction is the key distinctive characteristic of a focus group (Barbour and Morgan, 2017; Cyr, 2019; Savin-Baden and Howell, 2013).

The questions posed by the researcher and the interaction between the participants should invoke a group discussion. Through engaging in this group discussion, participants will be presented with the opportunity to share their own opinion about a topic, which will enable them to learn and understand the thoughts and opinions of other participants. This will lead to a comparison between one's own opinions and perspectives and those of others. In turn, this will generate new insights, both for the participants and for the researcher regarding the reasoning behind people's thoughts (Barbour and Morgan, 2017). With its focus on group interaction that leads to the exchange of thoughts, a focus group generates information/data that is not possible to obtain in individual settings.

By recreating the **social context** in which people form their opinions, a focus group helps a researcher to understand group dynamics and the construction of opinions. Furthermore, a focus group can be empowering for the participants themselves. The nature of recreating this social context enables the potential to elaborate on and discuss a specific topic which is otherwise a limited ability during a survey or even an in-depth interview. The responses from an individual participant are therefore not only shaped by his/her own experience, but also by the social setting of the focus group. What other

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participants have already brought forth, and the mere fact that you will have to express your thoughts in front of a group, will have an influence on what someone will say (Cyr, 2019).

The aforementioned characteristics also indicate that a focus group can make it easier to discuss difficult and complex issues or it can facilitate discussions within vulnerable groups (Cyr, 2019). Thanks to the interactive nature and group setting, people are enabled to better articulate their visions and might be more inclined to share their ideas on a difficult topic. Although, a word of precaution should be mentioned, as some topics might be too sensitive to discuss in a group setting.

According to Savin-Baden and Howell (2013), there are five types of focus groups: exploratory, phenomenological, clinical, storyline and issue development focus groups. Throughout Dignity, the focus group type will consist mostly of a **phenomenological** and, to a lesser extent, a **storyline focus group**. A phenomenological focus group specifies on how a group experiences a certain phenomenon and what the key characteristics are of this experience. Given that we want to explore how digital mobility influences a vulnerable-to-exclusion groups ability to travel, this type of focus group seems to be the most appropriate. Since we'll use the customer journey mapping as the main input of the focus group, aspects of the storyline type of focus group will also be incorporated.

2.2 Application within Dignity

The goal of the first phase in Dignity is to frame the digital gap within mobility. It is hereby important that we take the **perspective of the vulnerable-to-exclusion groups** themselves into account. A lot of information, both about and from the vulnerable-to-exclusion groups, is already collected. This data, however, is collected through individual methods, like the survey and the customer journey mapping. By discussing these results in a focus group setting, we add another layer of information to these results. From focus group theory we can see that the interactive nature has an added value to fully understand and contextualize how a specific vulnerable group experiences the digital gap within mobility. This digital gap is already researched in the previous steps, a focus group gives us the opportunity to validate these results.

From the theory and the intended goals of the focus group we can also explain why we stick with a **face-to-face organisation** with the vulnerable-to-exclusion groups (and why we thus opted for postponing it within the Dignity project timeline). Since Dignity is a research project in the first place, we want to test the whole framing phase methodology, including the focus group. As we have explained, the focus group is important to validate and give context to the results of previous research steps. The focus group helps complete the picture we want to paint with the framing methodology. Therefore, cancelling the

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focus group due to the COVID-19 pandemic was not an option. Moving the focus group to an online setting, which was another alternative option, was also not considered feasible. Part of the setup of the whole framing methodology was to research the digital gap in mobility from the standpoint of the vulnerable-to-exclusion groups. Since these groups are less digital literate, organising a digital focus group with them is not possible. Given that the customer journey mapping was already moved to an interview by telephone, the focus group has to be face-to-face to ensure that target groups have an opportunity to be included in the research. Moreover, for a focus group to really reach its intended goals, a face-to-face setting still is the best possible option. Like already mentioned, group interaction is a key characteristic of a focus group. Group interaction suffers to a great extent from an online or digital setting. In order not to lose important information or contributions from specific participants, we judged that for subtask 3.1.3 specifically, a digital alternative is not feasible (in contrast to other steps in the Dignity project, where the digital alternative is a more viable option). This leads us to the conclusion that the physical organisation of the focus group, based on focus group theory, is a vital research step in the Dignity project. In the next chapter, we give an overview of the practical organisation of the focus group.

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3. Organising the focus group

3.1 Timing and preparation

Since the focus group is expected to be organised face-to-face, the timing will depend on the current COVID-19 measures and restrictions in every pilot region. At this moment, we aim to have the focus group conducted in all pilot regions after summer, during **the autumn of 2021**. It's advised to start preparing well in advance to make sure the focus group reaches its envisioned goals. In first instance, a suitable physical location should be selected and participants recruited. After that, participants can be officially invited and the practical arrangements can be made. The specific content for each focus group in every pilot region will be prepared by Mobiel 21 and BUAS, but you may want to familiarize yourself with the questions that will give the focus group its direction. It's therefore important to inform your pilot contact at Mobiel 21 of the date when the focus group will take place as soon as you have set it. This way, the research team can start preparing the questions and topic list (see below) well in advance.

3.2 Participants and recruitment

The role of participants of a focus group is to provide detailed information while representing a **specific group of interest**. The participants have a considerable influence on the course of the focus group, which is why the recruitment of the participants is very important and should be carefully considered. A focus group could range depending on the engagement of the participants, which is why researchers recommend a group size of 8. This group size will generally allow a good group conversation providing a diversity of opinions and refrains from too many people engaging in conversation and making it too challenging. Having these numbers enables the moderator to involve all participants in the research areas without risking getting bogged down in a single topic. Another danger with larger groups is that the moderator can lose momentum in the discussion as they listen to successive views on a topic, and other participants may find themselves becoming increasingly bored.

For the Dignity focus group, pilots should follow these recommendations:

- recruit **8 to 10 participants** as a maximum. This group size should make it possible for the moderator to keep all participants focused and still have a valuable group discussion
- it's best to focus on **one Dignity vulnerable-to-exclusion target group**, preferably one that was targeted during the customer journey mapping. This choice should be based on your own pilot objectives. As a reminder, the Dignity target groups

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are: older people, people with disabilities, women, migrants, rural inhabitants, lower income and lower education
- recruitment of the participants for the focus group can also be based on the same participants of the customer journey mapping, by using the contacts that were established, but be careful not to compose the full group with them. Make sure to include 'new' participants in the focus group as well
- unless you specifically focus on women, a gender balance should be aimed for
- **participants have to be end users and not representatives** from organisations or associations. We want to hear from the vulnerable-to-exclusion groups themselves, since this is key for the focus group
- this doesn't mean organisations or associations that represent a specific group cannot play a role in the recruitment of participants. Contacting them might be the best way to gain access to your target group, since they are usually in direct contact with the people they represent
- when **inviting** participants, make sure to mention place and time of the focus group, the duration, the intended goals, the context of the project itself and privacy regulations.

When reflecting on the role of the participant, it should be considered that participants will need to put a considerable amount of effort into attending such a focus group which is why **compensation** in some degree might be recommended. This will ensure that participants are willing and enthusiastic about their participation even if the focus group is different to their expectations. The amount and type of compensation is freely determined by each organising pilot partner. It doesn't have to be a financial compensation, for example a small reception where you offer participants some food and beverages after the focus group or a coupon for a specific store or activity are also viable options.

3.3 Setting and facilitation

The focus group is expected to be organised in a **physical setting**. An appropriate location is important for the success of the focus group. Given that the participants are vulnerable-to-exclusion people, it's important to make sure that your location is easily accessible and that all participants are able to get there, especially if they need to use public transport . The focus group setting should enable the hosts and participants to build trust and encourage interaction to allow the possibility to probe for depth on certain topics. Before the initiation of the focus group the participants need to feel **safe and comfortable**, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic. All pilots should consult with their regional rules and regulations regarding spacing between participants and safety measures employed during this setting. Tables, chairs, pens and paper, and any

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other equipment or utilities that participants should require must be provided such as lavatories and water or other beverages. It's also important that the focus group setting is sufficiently set up to document the proceedings, such as an active audio recorder in place to record the conversations (if you want to record it). All participants should be focused on the discussion at hand and in order to do so they should all feel welcomed.

The facilitation of a focus group will require certain ground rules that all parties understand and accept. Some of the **ground rules** that are recommended are the following:

- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Confidentiality is assured.
- Keep the conversation in the group, since side conversations can distract the conversation flow.
- All should plan to participate, since everyone has important ideas and opinions.
- Anything someone wants to say is important.
- There are no right or wrong answers to a question.
- The goal is to hear all sides of an issue, positive and negative.

It's important to inform participants of all aforementioned safety efforts and ground rules in advance and to present participants with a **consent form** to ensure their willingness to participate. We will provide a template of such a consent from for you to adapt.

3.4 Flow and approach

The flow and timing within a focus group is considered to have a large impact on the response, tone and behaviour of the invited participants alongside the influence of each groups moderator. A loosely structured and very **relaxed approach** is advised because this appears to facilitate positive interaction between group members and the organisers. Participants should be enabled to discuss, challenge and modify their recollections and most importantly their experiences in their own time and way which makes them feel most comfortable. A core principle is that the small-group process prevents domination of discussion by a single person and at the same time encourages the more passive members to participate.

A typical focus group consists of five stages: introduction, initial questions, heart of the focus group with the most important questions, wrap up, debrief. During the heart of the focus group, we recommend to use the following approach to handle the questions:

- The question is presented by the moderator, potentially with the use of results from the previous project steps (see below)
- Participants spend several minutes writing down their views about the topic in question, after which each participant shortly shares his or hers ideas

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- Similar suggestions are grouped together and then the group discusses and clarifies the idea presented
- Each participant privately ranks each idea
- The ranking is tabulated and collated
- The overall ranking is discussed and re-ranked
- The votes are tallied to identify the ideas that are rated highest by the group as a whole and then the final rankings are tabulated and fed back to participants

Since this approach can be both time consuming as really valuable, we advise to employ it only with the most important or difficult questions. A focus group typically lasts for around **an hour and half to two hours**. This should be the maximum duration of the focus group, in order to keep participants interested and motivated. It's advised to plan an intermission after about an hour, to enable the participants and the moderator to relax and regain their focus.

3.5 Roles

During the focus group, different roles should be assigned. It's important that each role is given to a different person.

First, **we focus on the role of the moderator**, given that his/her role is vitally important for a successful focus group. In short, the moderator asks the questions, leads and concludes the subsequent discussions and makes sure that everyone participates.

The first task for the **moderator** is to bring the group together to start the discussion. While some people may have already introduced themselves to one another, many moderators begin with introductions of everyone in the room. This responsibility of the moderator sets the tone for the focus group as it proceeds, such that if the moderator issues a short and closed introduction of themselves, the focus group members are very likely to follow and only provide limited information about themselves. The moderator needs to be forthcoming, encouraging and the catalyst of the discussion

The moderator should keep in mind both the nature of the research question at hand, as well as the group dynamics that might arise given the group composition and the questions to be discussed. Next, consider the question and topic list in its entirety and develop a strategy for addressing each question. To do this, make sure, first, that the moderator understands each question. Then, explain the goal behind each question. Note that this is different from explaining the desired or hypothesized response that you suspect a question will elicit. Finally, you may wish to provide specific instructions regarding the moderator's overall approach to the conversations. You may, for example, encourage reflective listening, wherein the moderator clarifies, summarizes, and

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paraphrases certain points along the way so as to prevent miscommunication or misunderstanding.

Besides the moderator, there should be an **administrator**. This person is responsible for taking notes during the focus group and keeping track of everything that is being discussed. These notes are really important for the reporting afterwards and should therefore be done by a separate person from the moderator. The template for the reporting that will be provided can guide taking the notes, but it remains important to carefully write down not only the direct questions, but also how the discussion on a specific topic took place (level of (dis)agreement, certain participants that talked more than others,…). This is important information to be able to thoroughly analyse the data from the focus group.

The administrator should thus take notes during the discussion and describe the course of that discussion. To conclude each discussion, it is worthwhile to formulate an answer to each question based on the discussion and ask the group if they can agree on this. After the focus group, the administrator and moderator could also discuss the notes and answers together, in order to make a more detailed report afterwards.

Finally, it can be useful to have another person responsible for the more **practical organisation** before and during the focus group. This person welcomes the participants and makes sure that the participants have everything to fully participate to the discussion, like utilities, nametags or refreshments. To keep delays to a minimum, it's advised that this person is also in charge of the technical arrangements, so that the moderator or administrator can focus on their respective roles.

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4. Content of the focus group

4.1 Implementing results from previous steps

Following the collection of data produced through the customer journey mapping, it is necessary to establish the potential outcomes and to present guidelines to you as pilots in order to effectively analyse and utilize the results of the focus groups in combination with the previously obtained customer journey mapping and self-assessment data. It is important to note that the focus groups have been delayed due to COVID-19 and as per the original planning this should have already been completed, which is why these guidelines will account for multiple different scenarios regarding the potential correlations between the results of the different data capturing methods that already have been carried out.

Like discussed above, keeping in mind the nature of digital vulnerability of our research target group, the focus group must take place within a physical setting. The customer journey mapping data was collected through a digital setting which is why it's important for the focus groups to potentially challenge that data. The collaborative efforts of the survey, customer journey mapping and (to a lesser extent) the self-assessment denote three different methods of capturing data, however at this stage it is uncertain how the results produced will correlate with one another, especially as some will be carried out digitally and others physically.

Based on the results from the previous steps, we envision three possible outcomes that will influence the structure and content of the focus group. These outcomes depend on the extent to which the results overlap with each other. Depending on the outcome, you should aim to either use the results gathered as a starting point to further discussion or attempt to validate the confusing or conflicting results with help from the participants if required.

1. The first potential outcome of the results of the digital gap self-assessment and the customer journey mapping is that they **overlap and concur with one another**. This is considered the best-case scenario and can be denoted by analysing the results of the digitally acquired customer journey mapping data and the self-assessment data and comparing the results. If these analysed results are consistent then it presents a very strong indication the results gathered from the different data capturing methods are reliable and should be used as a foundation for the focus group. If this is the outcome, the pilots should utilize the reliable data as a starting point for the discussion. We recommend in this scenario that the pilot regions attempt to further explore ideas and concepts by using the conversation to attempt to increase the scope of the discussion as the pilot regions will already be

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in possession of reliable data and the focus groups will be far more useful to gauge individual sentiment and to focus on edge case users or scenarios in order to capture the best possible understanding of vulnerable-to-exclusion groups.

2. The second potential outcome of the data is that there is a **degree of overlap present, however the cause and effect of the results are not entirely clear** when comparing the digital gap self-assessment and customer journey mapping data. The pilot regions should proceed with using this data as a broad foundation but should not use this data with direct certainty. It is definitely recommended that further efforts are needed to validate this data and remove any uncertainty which should take place during the focus groups. During the focus group the pilot region should use the data as the main focus of the discussion and should attempt to investigate any contrasting information previously acquired through the data capturing methods and should involve the present participants to help direct the process. The first goal of the focus group should be to investigate the discrepancies and use the resources present at the focus group to restore certainty to the data.
3. The third outcome of the data can possibly present **results that don't overlap or concur with the different capturing methods**. This would firmly indicate that cause and effect are not clear at all within the results captured and that findings of the digital gap self-assessment data do not support that of the customer journey mapping. This could be for various reasons such as the difference between the customer journey mapping taking place in a digital setting instead of a physical, or the reasoning could be extremely complex. However, if this scenario is a reality for a pilot region, further efforts are most certainly required to discuss these results in the focus group, and the participants should be asked for help to interpret and possibly validate the gathered results. The focus group will then enact as a second chance to gather the required data and although the scenario is not ideal, the focus groups should be able to provide a concrete foundation of data to be utilized.

Utilizing this structure and taxonomy, we will be able to label all the results and make a topic list to discuss at the respective focus group. This will allow us to easily discuss and validate areas of concern with the physical focus groups.

4.2 Topic list and questions

The research partners within the Dignity project will look at the results from the subtasks 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 in each region (D3.1). Based on the three possible outcomes presented above, a **pilot specific topic list with concrete questions** will be prepared by Mobiel 21 and BUAS. This document contains what we want to learn from the focus group and will be your guide when organising it. The questions will be prepared in such a way that you

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can use them directly during the focus group. We will make use of a so called semi-structured focus group. This way you will both have a general overview and idea about the topics as well as concrete questions that will be handled during the focus group (Barbour and Morgan, 2017). When developing the topic list and questions, a good balance will be created between predefined questions you're going to ask and the specific information you want to know on the one hand and enough flexibility for the participants to really elaborate about the topics on the other hand.

Careful consideration should be given to the questions that will be the topic of the focus group. Be aware that in the limited time (two hours maximum), only eight to twelve questions can be asked. The flow of the questions should be well thought of beforehand and should go from broad to specific. The questions are, like in interviews, open in nature, as to give participants enough space to express their opinions, experiences and thoughts in their own words (Cyr, 2019).

4.3 Presenting the results to participants

The content of the focus group is based on the results of the previous steps in the framing phase of the Dignity project: the digital gap self-assessment (with inclusion of the survey) and the customer journey mapping. Based on these results, the topic list with concrete questions for the focus group will be developed for each pilot separately by the research partners. The questions can be introduced with reference to the results of the previous steps. If you want to present the participants with more context, you can use the first version of D3.1, where the results of the self-assessment and the customer journey mapping are presented, analysed and discussed. Conclusions from this analysis can be presented to the participants as an introduction and contextualization of the questions that will start the discussion. Be careful however not to steer the participants in a certain direction before the discussion starts. Presenting previous results should be the start of a discussion and give some context to the question at hand. It should not point to a direction for the answer on that question.

There are several ways you can present these results, if you have any doubts about how to do this, we can provide assistance if necessary. The results from the self-assessment and the survey can be presented by using **graphs or tables**. Make sure that these are easy to read and do not contain too much information. From the customer journey mapping, you can use for instance **quotes** from a specific interview or **conclusions** based on the whole set of interviews. Another possibility is make use of **probes**. These are short comments meant to invoke thought and discussion. In general, the results of the previous steps should keep the participants interested in the topic and the discussion.

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4.4 Recording and reporting the content

The list of questions we will provide for you, will also function as the guide for the reporting of the focus group results. After the focus group, we expect two aspects **for each question**. Firstly, a **general overview** of how the group discussion for this particular question went (was there a lot of disagreement? Did the discussion took a lot of time, or was it rather short?) in order to have a basic idea of the atmosphere during the focus group. Secondly, and most import, we expect a written down **answer to each question** on the list. It's important to note that we are not primarily interested in the responses of individual participants, but rather in the answer that results from the group discussion. You might want to wrap up the discussion of each question by reading the answer aloud for the whole group and confirm they agree with this. If there is no agreement from the whole groups, which is perfectly possible, this should also be carefully reported as to what the points of disagreement were.

To make your reporting work easier, we will provide a **template** for you to fill in and send back to us. This template will be the primary reporting document of the focus group and should therefore contain enough detailed information. Make sure you have someone whose only responsibility it is to follow the discussion and make notes (the so called 'administrator role' in the previous chapter). If the answers to the questions are written down in detail into the template during or immediately after the focus group, it's not necessary to make a recording of the focus group or provide us with a full transcription. However, it is always a good idea to record the focus group as a back up to the notes.

4.5 Analysis

Based on your reporting of the focus group, Mobiel 21 and BUAS will conduct the analysis of the focus group results. As a pilot, you only have to report about the discussion(s) of the group and the resulting answers to the questions into the template. The results from the focus groups will be incorporated into deliverable 3.1 to conclude the framing the gap phase within Dignity. During the analysis, it might be possible we ask you for further clarifications. For this purpose, it's important to carefully keep the notes you took during the focus group, even after the fully completed template was sent to us.

Good luck!

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