

# Modesty & Rape Culture: Indonesian Media's Gender-Sensitive Exploration

R. Hariyani Susanti<sup>1\*</sup>, Vera Sardila<sup>1</sup>, Aramudin<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Ilham Syarif<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Indonesian Language and Literature, Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Primary School Teacher Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Department of Science Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

The study of modesty culture and its correlation with rape culture in the media of Indonesia is a crucial examination of the societal norms and values that have a profound impact on the lives of women. The modesty culture, which values the suppression of sexuality and the need for women to be demure and reserved, has been shown to have a strong correlation with the perpetuation of rape culture in the media. This study aims to delve into this relationship, using a critical reading approach to analyze media content, in order to identify and understand the connection between modesty culture and rape culture using Stuart Hall encoding/decoding model in collecting data and analysis. The research design of this study involves a crucial examination of the correlation between modesty culture and rape culture in Indonesian media, with a focus on societal norms impacting women. The findings of this study will be used to develop recommendations that will contribute to the creation of a safer and more gender-sensitive professional and personal space for Indonesian women which include developing education programs, media literacy initiatives, and promoting gender equality and respect for women's rights to challenge and address harmful cultural norms and beliefs.

## 1. Introduction

The profound influence of cultural norms and values on women's lives and their broader surroundings is evident through the interplay of modesty culture and rape culture in Indonesia (Nuraeni & Listyowati, 2019; Widjaja, 2021). Modesty culture underscores the importance of women's demureness and sexual suppression, while rape culture perpetuates harmful beliefs and attitudes that normalize and trivialize sexual violence (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). This intersection fuels the normalization of gender-based violence, posing serious challenges for Indonesian women within their society and beyond.

\*Corresponding author E-mail address: radenhariyani@uin-suska.ac.id

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In the realm of media, modesty culture can be manipulated to rationalize or normalize sexual violence by placing blame on victims who do not conform to conservative dress codes or social norms (Nuraeni & Listyowati, 2019; Widjaja, 2021). This perpetuates damaging behaviors and attitudes, creating an unwelcoming atmosphere for Indonesian women both personally and professionally. Thus, delving into the intricate relationship between modesty culture and rape culture within media is of utmost importance, especially utilizing Stuart Hall's (1980) critical reading approach which involves the meticulous selection of pertinent media texts for data collection and the application of interpretive frameworks in data analysis.

This research is dedicated to comprehensively understanding the interconnection between modesty culture and rape culture in Indonesia's media landscape. It aspires to formulate recommendations that can foster a secure, gender-sensitive environment for Indonesian women in both their personal and professional lives. The insights derived from this study hold the potential to drive positive transformations by confronting the normalization of sexual violence, thereby paving the way for a safer and more respectful atmosphere for women, not only in Indonesia but also on a global scale. This research represents a substantial stride towards mitigating the detrimental effects of entrenched cultural values and promoting a more equitable and secure society for women worldwide.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Definition of Modesty Culture and Rape Culture**

The term "modesty culture" refers to a set of societal standards and beliefs that stress the idea of suppressing one's sexuality and promoting humility and restraint in behavior and appearance, particularly for women. Over the past few decades, modesty culture has received increasing attention from scholars and researchers in various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and media studies.

Recent studies have explored the impact of modesty culture on women's experiences and the role it plays in perpetuating harmful beliefs and attitudes towards women. For example, Nuraeni & Listyowati (2019) conducted a study that examined the intersection of modesty culture and rape culture in Indonesia and found that the emphasis on modesty in media and societal norms can contribute to the normalization of sexual violence and create a harmful environment for women.

Similarly, Widjaja (2021) conducted a study that investigated the impact of modesty culture on women's experiences in the Indonesian media and found that it perpetuated gender stereotypes and objectification of women. The study concluded that modesty culture can contribute to the normalization of sexual violence by blaming victims for not adhering to conservative norms and perpetuating harmful attitudes and behaviors towards women.

On the other hand, rape culture refers to a society or environment where sexual violence is normalized and excused in media and popular culture, and where victims of sexual violence are blamed and stigmatized, while perpetrators are excused or minimally punished. The consequences of rape culture are far-reaching and damaging to individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

Anderson (2017) in "The Consequences of Rape Culture" highlights the ways in which rape culture creates an environment where individuals are at risk for sexual violence, and where survivors of sexual violence are likely to face additional harm and trauma. Banyard (2014) in "Rape culture: then and now" discusses the historical roots of rape culture and how it has evolved over time.

DeGue and DiLillo (2014) in "Rape myth acceptance, endorsement of feminine norms, and sexual aggression in a sample of college men" found a correlation between accepting rape myths, endorsing traditional gender norms, and engaging in sexual aggression. Kilmartin (2015) in "Shifting the paradigm: Primary prevention of sexual violence" argues for the need to shift societal attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence in order to effectively prevent it.

Hébert and Price (2017) in "Sexual violence in the lives of Black women: The impact of historical and contemporary trauma" examine the intersection of race and gender in the experiences of Black women who have survived sexual violence, and the ways in which they are impacted by both historical and contemporary traumas. Sanday (2007) in "Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus" examines the phenomenon of fraternity gang rape and the role of male privilege and societal attitudes in facilitating such acts.

The references reviewed in this paper demonstrate the pervasiveness and damaging effects of rape culture in society. Understanding the ways in which rape culture operates is crucial for efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence, and to create a culture where all individuals are safe and respected.

## **2.2. The Intersection of Modesty Culture and Rape Culture**

This literature review examines the relationship between modesty culture and sexual violence, as well as the intersections of rape culture and gendered language in news media. Houser (2018) argues that modesty culture perpetuates sexual violence by promoting restrictive gender norms and blaming victims for their own assault. Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny (1992) support this claim by demonstrating that a victim's attire affects the perpetrator's perception of responsibility for the assault. Kilbourne (1999) provides a broader perspective on the impact of media and advertising on shaping gender norms and attitudes, including those related to sexual violence.

Holmstrom and Fugl-Meyer (2004) conduct a comprehensive review of research on female sexual functioning, which has important implications for understanding the impact of sexual violence and gender-based expectations on women's sexual health. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) review the persistent prevalence of rape myths in society, which serve to excuse or justify sexual violence and place responsibility on the victim.

Finally, Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) analyze gendered language in three Italian newspapers, revealing how media can perpetuate gender stereotypes and contribute to a culture that normalizes sexual violence. The authors of these articles highlight the complex and interrelated factors that contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence, including modesty culture, rape culture, media and advertising, sexual health, and rape myths.

## **2.3. The Role of Media in Shaping Modesty Culture and Rape Culture**

The role of media in shaping modesty culture and rape culture has been widely studied in the field of sociology and psychology. Farris (2015) investigated the policing of girls' dress in US schools and found that modesty is often used as a tool to control girls' bodies and regulate their behavior. Kilbourne (1999) explored the impact of advertising on our thoughts and feelings and how it reinforces cultural norms and expectations, including those around modesty. Media can sometimes perpetuate stereotypes that associate modesty with conservatism or backwardness, leading to stigmatization and misunderstanding of individuals who adhere to modesty, and in some instances, the media can objectify individuals who choose to dress modestly, reducing them to their clothing choices and undermining their agency. (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022).

Lonsway and Fitz Gibbon (1997) conducted a review of rape myths and found that media often perpetuates harmful beliefs about sexual violence and reinforces rape culture. McKinney (2007) studied the role of media in promoting or reducing sexism and found that media has the potential to either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes.

Ward (1995) reviewed the role of media in adolescent sexual health and made recommendations for media to play a more positive role in promoting healthy sexual attitudes and behaviors. These studies demonstrate the significant impact that media can have on shaping cultural norms around modesty and sexual violence, highlighting the importance of media literacy and critical consumption of media.

#### **2.4. Previous Studies on the Intersection of Modesty Culture and Rape Culture in the Media**

There has been some research on the intersection of modesty culture and rape culture in the media. One study by Amanda K. Baumle and Kimberly A. Tyler (2018) titled "Modesty Culture, Rape Culture, and the Media: An Examination of Miss America Pageants and Local Television News" found that the Miss America pageants perpetuated both modesty culture and rape culture. The authors found that "women's bodies and sexual behaviors are tightly regulated in both modesty culture and rape culture, and that the media reinforces these cultural norms through its representation of women".

Another study by Rachel F. Levine (2015) titled "Modesty Culture and Rape Culture: How they Intersect and Reinforce One Another" analyzed the ways in which modesty culture and rape culture intersect and reinforce one another. The author found that modesty culture "teaches women to view their bodies as objects that must be covered and controlled in order to avoid sexual attention and to maintain their virtue, which can contribute to a culture where women are blamed for their own sexual assaults". These studies suggest that modesty culture and rape culture intersect and reinforce one another in the media through the representation of women's bodies and sexual behaviors.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study draws upon Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to investigate the representation of gender roles and expectations in Indonesian media. This model provides a valuable framework for understanding how media content is created (encoded) and subsequently interpreted (decoded). In the context of this research, it helps elucidate how media messages regarding gender roles are constructed and how they may be interpreted by different segments of the audience.

To begin, the encoding phase involved a meticulous analysis of media content, particularly advertisements and news articles, that were deemed relevant to the study's objectives. Researchers examined the visual and textual elements within these media representations, looking for cues and symbols that conveyed messages related to gender roles and expectations. This involved identifying recurring themes, stereotypes, and narratives that were prevalent in the selected materials. The encoding process also considered the broader socio-cultural context in which these media messages were produced, recognizing that they are shaped by cultural norms, values, and ideologies.

Moving to the decoding phase, the researchers aimed to understand how the encoded messages were interpreted within the media content itself. This involved conducting qualitative content analysis of the media materials, including advertisements and news articles. By delving into the content, researchers sought to identify and analyze recurring themes, symbols, and

narratives related to gender roles and expectations. This approach aligns with Hall's concept of polysemy, which posits that media messages can have multiple layers of meaning and interpretation. Researchers aimed to uncover the nuances in how these messages were constructed and conveyed within the media content itself.

Table 1.

*Research methodology*

Phase	Description	Sample
Data Collection (Encoding)	Selection of relevant media content including advertisements and news articles	<i>Rabbani's advertisement</i>
Data Analysis (Decoding)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identification of visual and textual cues.</li> <li>-Analysis of recurring themes and narratives.</li> <li>-Consideration of socio-cultural context.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Highlight the importance of challenging harmful stereotypes in media.</i></li> <li>- <i>Promote non-responsible advertising practices</i></li> <li>- <i>Advocate for addressing root causes of sexual assault instead of victim blaming.</i></li> </ul>

## 4. Research Findings and Discussions

### 4.1. Gender Roles and Expectations in Media Representation: Rabbani Adverts and Payakumbuh Timur Female District Head Case Analysis

The recent advertisement by Rabbani, an Indonesian modesty fashion brand, highlights the persistence of traditional gender roles and expectations in media representation. The statement "It is important for women to dress modestly and avoid clothing that might inspire inappropriate thoughts in men." places the burden of men's thoughts and actions on women and reinforces the notion of modesty being a form of protection against sexual assault. This type of victim blaming narrative is not new, as similar advertisements have been criticized in the past for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining the reality of sexual assault (Forbes, 2021). It is concerning that despite widespread criticism, there are still those who support such advertisements and uphold traditional gender roles and expectations.

The recent dismissal of a female head of district (camat) in Payakumbuh Timur due to her fashion content on TikTok highlights the limited value placed on women's abilities and skills, instead focusing solely on their obedience. This not only infringes on women's right to freedom of expression, but also places their livelihoods in jeopardy. The impact of this kind of discrimination and restriction on women's lives and career opportunities cannot be understated (Antara News, 2022).

Victim blaming in advertising is a pervasive and damaging trend that reinforces the harmful stereotype that women are responsible for preventing sexual assault. This type of narrative undermines the reality of sexual assault, which is that it is a crime that is committed by the perpetrator, not the victim (Forbes, 2021). The harmful impact of victim blaming in sexual assault cases can lead to a culture of fear and shame for survivors, making it harder for them to come forward and seek justice (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021).

Therefore, it is imperative for media representation to move away from traditional gender roles and expectations, and to reject the notion of modesty being a form of protection against sexual assault. Instead, the focus should be on addressing and combating the root causes of sexual assault, rather than blaming victims. Until this happens, women will continue to be unfairly

burdened with the responsibility of preventing sexual assault, while the perpetrators are given a pass.

#### 4.2. Rape Myths in Indonesian Media and Society

The issue of the prevalence and impact of rape myths in Indonesian media and society has gained significant attention in recent years. One of the most widely held rape myths is the belief that women who wear revealing clothing are inviting sexual assault. This harmful belief was recently perpetuated by once again, Rabbani, which claimed to have taken data from the National Commission on Violence against Women (KOMNAS Perempuan) that showed how women's clothing can lead to sexual assault. However, this statement was quickly debunked by KOMNAS Perempuan on January 10th, 2023. In a tweet, the commission confirmed that their Annual Record (CATAHU) from 2002 to 2022 never once stated that women's clothing was a trigger for sexual assault. In their complete press release, KOMNAS Perempuan clarified that the message in the Rabbani advertisement was misogynistic and continued to place the blame for sexual assault on women (KOMNAS Perempuan, 2023).



Figure 1. KOMNAS Perempuan clarified Rabbani's citation allegation

**Translation of Figure 1:** Clarification on the reference to data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) in support of the advertisement presented by Rabbani.

Contrary to misconceptions, over the course of 20 years (2001-2022), Komnas Perempuan has never asserted that women's clothing, even if revealing, is a cause of sexual violence.

The media also frequently perpetuates other rape myths by portraying women as responsible for their own sexual assault, whether it be because of their clothing, voice, personality, or way of speaking (Ihsani, 2021). These beliefs are not only untrue, but they also ignore the reality that people who do sexual harassment and assault because they want to, not because of clothing or traditional gender roles. Furthermore, these myths and gender roles create a permissive society that allows men to commit such acts without consequences. The perpetuation of rape myths in Indonesian media and society is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The belief that women's clothing, behavior, or personality invites sexual assault only serves to place the blame on the victim and ignore the responsibility of the perpetrator. It is crucial that the media and society work to dispel these harmful myths and create a culture that recognizes the role of perpetrators in sexual assault.

#### **4.3. Representations of Sexual Assault Survivors in Indonesian Media: The Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Media Campaigns**

The representation of female victims of violence in the media is a complex issue that intersects with culture, religion, and media campaigns. The recent case of a female victim of violence in the Indonesian media, as reported in The Jakarta Post's articles about UGM's case, can be analyzed in light of this issue (Diana et al, 2021). This article discusses the representation of female victims of violence in news media, specifically in the case of a female victim involved in a high-profile sexual harassment case at a university in Indonesia. The authors analyze the language and tone used in news articles about the case published in The Jakarta Post, a major English-language newspaper in Indonesia, and highlight how the victim is often portrayed as passive and helpless, with a focus on her physical appearance rather than her experience as a survivor. The authors argue that this type of representation reinforces harmful stereotypes about gender and violence and suggest that news media should take a more proactive approach to reporting on cases of violence against women by centering the experiences and perspectives of survivors.

The research on Representations of Sexual Assault Survivors in Indonesian Media highlights how media representations of female victims of violence in Indonesia often reinforce harmful cultural and religious stereotypes. For example, media representations of female victims of violence often portray them as shameful, weak, and helpless. This perpetuates the idea that women are responsible for their own victimization and reinforces victim-blaming attitudes in the society.

In the case of UGM's case, The Jakarta Post's articles describe the female victim as a "graduate student" and a "victim of violence," but the articles do not provide any information on her background or personal life. The articles also focus heavily on the legal proceedings of the case, rather than the victim's experience or the impact of the violence on her life.

This representation of the victim as a faceless and nameless entity reinforces the idea that women's experiences of violence are not important or worth discussing. This lack of attention to the victim's experience can further harm her by minimizing the seriousness of the violence she experienced and perpetuating the idea that women are not deserving of empathy and support.

The representation of a victim as a faceless and nameless entity is a powerful tool used in various forms of media and communication, such as news reports, statistics, and policy documents. It is often used to convey the scale and prevalence of violence against women, but it can also have unintended consequences.

One of the most significant issues with this representation is that it can reinforce the idea that women's experiences of violence are not important or worth discussing. When a victim is presented as an anonymous statistic or a faceless image, it becomes easy for people to distance themselves from the reality of the situation. This can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding towards the victim, as well as a general apathy towards the issue of violence against women.

Furthermore, this lack of attention to the victim's experience can further harm her by minimizing the seriousness of the violence she experienced. When a victim is reduced to a mere number or symbol, it can be easy to overlook the traumatic impact that violence has on her life. By not acknowledging the complexity of her experience, the victim can be further victimized and marginalized.

This representation also perpetuates the idea that women are not deserving of empathy and support. When women's experiences of violence are not given the attention they deserve, it

sends a message that their suffering is not as important as that of other groups. This can lead to a sense of isolation and a lack of resources for victims of violence.

In order to address this issue, it is essential to recognize the importance of elevating the voices and experiences of victims of violence. Rather than reducing them to nameless and faceless entities, we should strive to listen to their stories, acknowledge their pain, and provide them with the support and resources they need to heal. By doing so, we can work towards a society that recognizes the importance of empathy and compassion towards victims of violence, and is committed to ending gender-based violence.

Violence against women is a widespread problem in Indonesia, with both physical and psychological abuse being prevalent in various forms. Unfortunately, media campaigns aimed at combating violence against women in the country often focus on changing the behavior of victims rather than addressing the underlying causes of violence and changing the behavior of perpetrators. This approach is problematic and can reinforce victim-blaming attitudes that contribute to the normalization of violence against women.

By focusing on victim behavior, these campaigns imply that the responsibility for preventing violence falls on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Victims are often told to dress modestly, avoid going out at night, and be aware of their surroundings to reduce the risk of violence. While these recommendations may be helpful in some situations, they do not address the root causes of violence against women, such as cultural and religious beliefs that contribute to gender-based violence.

Moreover, the focus on victim behavior can reinforce harmful attitudes that blame victims for the violence they experience. For instance, if a victim is blamed for wearing revealing clothing or going out late at night, the perpetrator is absolved of responsibility, and the victim may be less likely to report the violence for fear of being blamed and judged.

It is important to note that changing the behavior of perpetrators is crucial in combatting violence against women. This requires addressing the underlying cultural and religious beliefs that contribute to gender-based violence. For instance, some cultural and religious beliefs in Indonesia may condone violence against women, which perpetuates harmful attitudes towards women and justifies violent behavior. These beliefs need to be challenged, and education on healthy relationships, gender equality, and non-violent conflict resolution should be promoted.

Media campaigns should also focus on holding perpetrators accountable for their behavior, rather than shifting the burden of prevention onto the victims. This involves promoting legal measures, such as criminalizing domestic violence and sexual harassment, and increasing access to legal recourse for victims.

Media campaigns that focus on changing the behavior of victims rather than perpetrators reinforce victim-blaming attitudes and fail to address the underlying cultural and religious beliefs that contribute to violence against women. Addressing these root causes and promoting accountability for perpetrators are crucial steps in preventing violence against women in Indonesia. The Jakarta Post's articles on the UGM's case represent a missed opportunity to provide a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of a female victim of violence. To combat violence against women, media representations of female victims of violence need to move beyond harmful cultural and religious stereotypes and focus on providing support and empathy to victims. Media campaigns also need to focus on addressing the root causes of violence against women, rather than solely on changing the behavior of victims.



#### **4.4. Impact of Education and Media Literacy on Women's Safety in Indonesia**

The impact of education and media literacy on promoting women's safety in Indonesia is an important area of research. Studies have shown that education plays a crucial role in empowering women and enabling them to recognize and challenge harmful cultural norms and practices, including rape culture and modesty culture, that perpetuate gender-based violence (Papworth & Milne, 2021). Additionally, media literacy is essential in enabling individuals to critically analyze media content and identify harmful messages that promote rape culture and modesty culture (Nasir et al., 2019).

Research suggests that comprehensive sex education, including information on consent and healthy relationships, can help reduce rates of sexual violence and empower women to assert their rights and boundaries (Papworth & Milne, 2021). Similarly, media literacy education can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to identify and challenge harmful media content that promotes rape culture and modesty culture (Nasir et al., 2019).

Therefore, promoting education and media literacy in Indonesia can be an effective strategy in creating a safer and more gender-sensitive environment for women. This includes efforts to incorporate comprehensive sex education into school curriculums and to develop media literacy programs that target women and other vulnerable groups (Papworth & Milne, 2021). By promoting education and media literacy, Indonesia can work towards addressing harmful cultural norms and practices and creating a more equitable and safer society for women.

### **5. Recommendation**

#### **5.1. Safe and Gender-Sensitive Environment for Indonesian Women**

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be made to create a safer and more gender-sensitive environment for Indonesian women. Firstly, media literacy programs should be implemented in schools and community settings to educate women and men on how to recognize and challenge rape culture and modesty culture in media. These programs should also promote critical thinking and empower women to speak out against gender-based violence.

In addition, it is important to address the cultural and societal norms that perpetuate rape culture and modesty culture in Indonesia. This can be achieved through education and awareness-raising campaigns, targeting both men and women, to promote gender equality and respect for women's rights. Such campaigns should be designed and implemented in collaboration with local communities and stakeholders and should be culturally appropriate and sensitive to local contexts. It is also crucial to strengthen and enforce existing laws and policies on gender-based violence and ensure that they are implemented effectively. This includes providing adequate support services for survivors of violence, such as counseling and legal assistance, as well as increasing the accountability of perpetrators through improved law enforcement and judicial systems.

Secondly, educational institutions and workplaces should implement policies and programs to address sexual harassment and discrimination. These programs should include training on gender sensitivity, bystander intervention, and support services for survivors.

Thirdly, there should be a greater emphasis on promoting gender equality and challenging harmful cultural norms and beliefs through public campaigns and advocacy efforts. This can be achieved through collaboration with community leaders, civil society organizations, and government agencies.

It is important to create a safe and gender-sensitive environment for Indonesian women, and education and media literacy play a vital role in achieving this goal. By implementing the above recommendations, we can work towards creating a society that is free from gender-based violence and discrimination.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research sheds light on the harmful intersection of modesty culture and rape culture in Indonesian media, which perpetuates traditional gender roles, reinforces harmful cultural and religious stereotypes, and fosters a permissive society that allows sexual assault to occur without consequences. The research highlights the need to create safe and gender-sensitive spaces for women in Indonesian media, which reject the notion that modesty is a form of protection against sexual assault and focus on addressing the root causes of sexual violence. It is crucial to combat the prevalence of rape myths in Indonesian media and society, as they undermine efforts to prevent sexual assault and blame the victim rather than holding the perpetrator accountable. Finally, media campaigns and news media should take a proactive approach to reporting on cases of violence against women by centering the experiences and perspectives of survivors, thus providing a platform for their voices to be heard and driving social change.

The research concludes that media representation needs to move away from traditional gender roles and expectations and reject the notion of modesty being a form of protection against sexual assault. The focus should be on addressing and combating the root causes of sexual assault rather than blaming the victim. The perpetuation of rape myths in Indonesian media and society needs to be addressed, as it creates a permissive society that allows men to commit sexual assault without consequences. Finally, media campaigns and news media should take a more proactive approach to reporting on cases of violence against women by centering the experiences and perspectives of survivors.

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