Uses and Gratifications of Computers in South African Elderly People

Usos y gratificaciones de los ordenadores en personas mayores en Sudáfrica

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with residents at an old-aged home in Cape Town, South Africa, this study examines the main uses and gratifications elderly people get from computers. While the research focus in Africa has been on the health of elderly people, particularly with respect to HIV/AIDS, there is little research into their adoption of new technologies, as the research focus with respect to that topic has been primarily on youth. This study found that the participants use email and social media to maintain contact with family and friends outside of, and sometimes even within the neighborhood. Furthermore, keeping in contact involved not only communication, but also observation of activities – like news, photographs and discussions. Using a uses and gratifications framework, this study found that participants felt connected with society both through their communication with and observation of people, and through keeping themselves informed about news and current interest topics. By using the Internet the elderly people communicated with more people than they had before. Some of the participants felt less isolated and lonely because of their computer use. Nevertheless, use of computers did not weaken their interpersonal contact outside of computer use.

RESUMEN

A partir de entrevistas en profundidad, realizadas en un hogar de la tercera edad en Ciudad del Cabo (Sudáfrica), este estudio analiza los principales usos y gratificaciones que reciben las personas mayores en interacción con los ordenadores. En África, mientras el énfasis investigador se ha puesto en los últimos años en la salud de los mayores, especialmente en cuanto al SIDA, existe muy poca investigación sobre el uso de los mayores en cuanto a nuevas tecnologías, ya que la investigación en relación con las mismas se ha centrado principalmente en la juventud. En este estudio se halló que los participantes utilizan el correo electrónico y las redes sociales para mantener el contacto con familiares y amigos y a veces incluso con su vecindario. Además, mantener el contacto suponía no solo comunicación, sino también observación de actividades, como noticias, fotografías y conversaciones. En el contexto de los usos y gratificaciones, el trabajo ha evidenciado que los participantes se sentían conectados con la sociedad, tanto por su comunicación como por la observación de las personas, y por mantenerse informados de las noticias y los temas de interés actuales. Mediante el uso de Internet, las personas de edad avanzada se comunicaban mucho más de lo que antes se habían comunicado con otras personas. Algunos de los participantes se sentían menos aislados y solos, debido a su uso del ordenador. Sin embargo, se demostró también que el uso de los ordenadores no obstaculizó los contactos interpersonales tradicionales.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Uses and gratifications, older adults, computer use, social networking sites, social media, Internet.
Usos y gratificaciones, mayores, destreza informática, redes sociales, medios, Internet.

1. Introduction

Gilly & Zeithaml (1985) wrote that «interest in the elderly [had] burgeoned in the last ten years because this demographic segment –defined as adults aged 65 and older– [had] expanded in size and spending power» (353). The interest they referred to had mostly been consumer market research in the USA, and they explored whether older adults were using new consumer-related technologies. Findings showed that older adults held negative views of innovations and were not quick to adopt new innovations. They were also not as aware of new technologies as younger people were. The research used these findings to make recommendations for making technologies and sources of information more accessible and useful to older adults.

During the 1990s the focus became more specific – researching recommendations for making computers more accessible and useful to older adults. This research trend was located mainly in the field of educational gerontology in the USA. The older adult age group was still expanding in size, the 75+ age group being the fastest growing age group in the USA (Lawhon & Ennis, 1996). Trends during the period leading up to 1985 suggested that older adults were unwilling and unable to use new innovations, like computers. It was predicted that computer illiteracy among older adults would increase as the size of the age group increased (Baldi, 1997; Morgan, 1994). As a result, the overarching recommendation that came out of research in the 1990s was for computer skills training courses for older adults. It was found that older adults approached such courses with a positive view, believing in the suggested benefits of computer use (Morgan, 1994). The conclusion was that previous research results related to older adults' use of new technologies could not be applied to older adults' use of computers, especially where older adults were offered computer skills training courses specific to their age group's needs. Recommendations were then also made for adapting computer software interface design to cater for older adults' needs (Hutchison & Eastman, 1997).

Going into the new millennium, the Internet –as the newest medium of communication– still occupied, with computers, significant research space (Ruggiero, 2000). While progress was made in discovering how best to adapt computer training and the Internet to users' needs, it was recognised that a better understanding of these needs would illuminate why different users came away from their experience with computers with varying degrees of satisfaction and partiality (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Consequently, uses and gratifications studies often appeared in research into older adults' media use. Mellor, Firth and Moore (2008) conducted quantitative and qualitative research in Australia to investigate whether the use of computers and the Internet could lower levels of social isolation of older adults. However, the results were mixed, with surveys showing that the older adults' overall well-being did not significantly improve, but the older adults saying in interviews that they did benefit from using computers and the Internet. In another study in Australia in 2008, quantitative research showed that reduced feelings of loneliness in older adults appeared where they used the Internet for communication, but not where they used it to make new social contacts (Sum, Mathews, Hughes & Campbell, 2008).

More recently, a uses and gratifications study in the USA focused on social networking that older adults engaged in online. A survey had shown that «about 51% of all Americans aged 50-64 and 33% of those over 65 had a Facebook account, although a lot less [were] regular daily users» (Ancu, 2012: 1). In 2013, Lelkes's research in Europe reported results similar to those of Mellor et al. (2008) in Australia. It found that older adults who used the Internet reported that their well-being benefitted from this. It also found that the more older adults used the Internet, the less they experienced social isolation outside of Internet use.

In summary, research over the past forty years or so has identified various reasons why older adults use media – for information, entertainment and social utility, with social utility including communicating with others in society and making new social contacts. Research has also explored how these uses have affected older adults' sense of loneliness versus community, how the uses have affected their social involvement (networking versus isolation) and how they feel about that, and how they feel about their well-being. The research covered in this review was conducted in the USA, Australia and Europe, and displays a movement from the general – new technologies and innovations –to the more specific– computers, the Internet, then Facebook.

Since life expectancy in South Africa is lower than in the USA or Europe there has not been the same extent of research trends around the older adult age group. In addition, South Africa's economic climate differs from those in the USA, Australia or Europe in ways that cause differences in the populations' use of computers. A uses and gratifications study of older adults' computer use in South Africa thus makes new contributions to existing research.

South Africa is placed 5th in Africa for Internet usage with only 2.2 out of every 100 people connected to broadband services, but mobile broadband subscriptions are growing at a rate of 30% per year[1]. Despite the digital divide, Internet access in South Africa is growing with 40.9% of South African households having access to the Internet at home or elsewhere in 2013 (Statistics South Africa, 2013). The growth of the mobile Internet has meant that more people use their mobile phones to browse the Internet, and as a result there is wide popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Donner & Gitau, 2009).

2. Statement of the problem

Research into elderly people's (aged 65 and above) use of media has developed as the demographic has grown in size and spending power (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). In South Africa, the older population has had to adapt to a changing society, as a result of political changes and the dynamics of society which led to migration of young people to cities for jobs (Bohman & al., 2007). While the research focus in Africa has been on the health of elderly people, particularly with respect to HIV/AIDS, there has been little to no research into their adoption of new technologies, as the research focus here has been primarily on youth. The elderly are an important section of society and it is important to study their use of media, particularly as it may have implications for intergenerational communication.

Drawing on interviews conducted with residents at an old-aged home in Cape Town, South Africa, this study examines the main uses and gratifications elderly people get from computers. Firstly, the study asked, why do they use computers? This explored whether they used computers for sending emails to or receiving emails from family, friends, colleagues or subscriptions, playing games, finding information via search engines, watching or listening to media, engaging with social media, or any further uses. Secondly, the study asked, what are the effects of these uses on elderly people? I.e. whether advantages included strengthened contact with others in society either through the computer only or outside of computer use too, weakened contact with others in society outside of computer use, a higher or lower sense of affiliation with others in society, relief from boredom, greater or reduced feelings of loneliness, or anything else.

The present study emphasises how the use of computers affects elderly people's social connections. The impact of the Internet on social connections is under-researched, with some literature concluding that the Internet strengthens interpersonal contact and

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other literature concluding the opposite (Hogeboom, McDermott, Perrin, Osman & Bell-Ellison, 2010). In 2012 statistics showed that the fastest growing age group to use social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) were older adults (Ancu, 2012). Therefore a study of how elderly people use computers and how they are consequently affected is of significance, particularly in the African context where the focus has been primarily on youth adoption of new technologies and social media.

Moreover, a uses and gratifications approach to this study is appropriate as the intention is to understand why and how elderly people seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. According to Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch's (1973-1974) seminal research in this area, the audience is active and seeks out 5 potential uses of media: information, identifying with media characters, simple entertainment, to enhance social interaction or to escape from the stress of daily life. The uses and gratifications approach is a theoretical approach that seeks to understand why and how

people choose specific media to satisfy specific needs. The emergence of computer mediated communication revived the uses and gratifications approach (Ruggiero, 2000), which sees the audience as active though it does not explore media content or take into account the socio-cultural context.

3. Methodology

The methodology for this research article was in-depth interviews, focusing on a limited number of participants. Given that the interpretive paradigm is what underlies this study, a qualitative research design was

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the best approach. The interpretive paradigm has to do with the everyday behaviour of people in interpreting events and creating meaning (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Similarly, qualitative research is conducted to «describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives» (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 2).

This study was informed by the notion that older adults use computers for particular reasons, and further guided by the notion that older adults obtain particular gratifications from computer use. The interpretive paradigm underlying the qualitative approach to this study is logical because the use of computers is an everyday, routine behaviour of individuals –in this study, older adults– in response to problems of social inactivity, boredom, loneliness or anything else; and the gratifications from computer use are meanings created by these individuals as they interpret the effects of their computer use.

Use of in-depth interviews was the methodological choice because the participants could be observed and in-depth information such as their deeper thoughts and the meanings behind their words could be collected from them. According to Denzin and Lincoln

(1994: 361), «interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings». Participants were drawn from the pool of residents of the Glen Retirement Hotel (pseudonym). This was a hotel in Cape Town that was converted in 2012 to a home for the elderly. Its communal areas are a dining-room, lounge, sunroom, bar and reading room and, more significantly for this study, a computer area equipped with two computers. In addition, there is Wi-Fi access in the computer area, lounge, and bar and reading room. The Glen is within walking distance of a beach and other social locales. The Glen is located in an affluent socio-economic area and it was assumed that sample would include affluent grandparents who use the Internet to communicate with loved ones outside of the neighborhood. Moreover, interviews included questions about social networking via the Internet versus social networking in the Glen's communal areas (without use of the Internet) and the neighborhood's social locales.

Residents aged 65 and older who used computers and for whom English was a first language were invited to sign up to be interviewed. Six residents out of The Glen's 25 residents met the age requirements –they were all 73 and older– and used the computers or Internet at The Glen. In the research discussed in the literature review, the most significant qualitative research was conducted by Mellor, Firth and Moore (2008) using 20 participants over 12 months. The data for this study was collected over one week –the times offered by the Glen– and six residents were interviewed. As a result, the conclusions drawn from this sample serve only the purposes of this study and cannot be generalised.

Since this research made use of human subjects as sources of data, based on the University of Cape Town (UCT) Code for Research involving Human Subjects, informed consent was secured from the research subjects in this study, offering privacy and confidentiality to participants who wished to remain anonymous – no information that reveals participants' identities has been included in this article. The interviews took place in a neutral venue at The Glen where noise would not interfere negatively with the quality of the recordings. As an ethical consideration, participants were asked permission for the interviews to be recor-

ded after a rapport had first been built with them. Pre-set interview questions were at first general, progressing into more specific and possibly less comfortable questions for the participants to answer. Discretion was exercised regarding how far participants were allowed to go off topic before they were brought back to the purpose of the interviews. Time was monitored as participants should not become bored or weary. No single interview was allowed to last longer than 45 minutes. Data was not only collected in recordings but also in observation notes made during interviews and visits to The Glen.

This data was analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The observation notes aided in selection of extracts to be transcribed from each interview's recording. The extracts selected were those that pertained to the interview questions, both pre-set and spontaneous follow-up questions. Initial codes were then written onto the transcription. These are the key points identified. As the theoretical framework of this study is uses and gratifications, the initial codes that were identified were points that related to why the participant used computers and how the participant was affected by this computer use. Next, the initial codes were grouped into themes. After that, the final themes and subthemes were sorted and consolidated and were those that emerged across, not within, interviews. These were about social networking via the Internet, and social networking without using the Internet, and how the one affects the other.

It is a limitation of this methodology that the conclusions drawn in the research article cannot be generalised. However, an advantage of the in-depth interviews as methodological choice is that the data collection times were free and uninterrupted. The advantage of this study's qualitative approach is that it supports a recent trend in uses and gratifications research of investigating subjective experience of new media use –especially to see «the extent to which these media… create dependency or replace other forms of human communication» (Sherry & Boyan, 2008: 5.242).

4. Results and discussion

a) Use of computers. The three eldest participants, aged early 80s to early 90s, were the more regular computer users. One of them had a Macintosh computer and his own Internet connection in his room, and used this every evening. Another participant also had her computer in her room with her own Internet connection, and used it every night. The third one used her laptop in The Glen's computer area two or three times a day for various periods of time depending on what was on email and Facebook. Of the three youngest participants, all in their 70s, only one used the computer on a regular basis –a couple of times a week, usually Skyping on a Sunday evening. The other two wanted to use the computer to email more regularly.

All six of the participants used email, mostly to correspond with family and friends. One of them used to correspond with colleagues but had not done so since he retired. He wanted to start using The Glen's computers to email his son living 50 kilometers away, a cousin living in Canada and granddaughters living in Gauteng. Another participant had only started using computers three months previously and had only ever sent about three emails to her son living on an island off the coast of Spain. These two participants were among the youngest of the six participants. One of the eldest participants was subscribed to the Yacht Club's newsletter emails.

Half of the participants used computers to play card games. One of them also played Scrabble, an application on Facebook. She said:

«It's lovely because you can take all the time in the world. And you can put in words and you can take them out and you can take all day. [My friend has] got her laptop at home and she plays and when she's had her turn then it comes my turn» (interview, May 9, 2014).

Setting one's own pace when using media is a preference that emerged before 1985 in research into older adults' sources of information about new technologies. Because of this preference, whereas younger people's main source of information about technologies was television (a medium that presents information at an externally set pace), older adults' main source of information was newspapers which can be read at a self-controlled pace (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). One of the participants who did not play computer games found it too difficult to control the mouse. Another said that games were a waste of time.

The three eldest participants used Google to find information. One of them also did all his banking online but expressed concern about security, which was a reason given by another for not using online banking. One of the three youngest participants wanted to start using The Glen's computers to use the Internet for general knowledge. Only one of the participants played DVDs and listened to music on the computer. He said that he had a music library of 10,000 tracks. He also used an application called Desktop Lyrics so

that the songs' lyrics would appear on the computer screen when they were played. In addition, he used the computer to type and print letters to the media, read online newspapers, make posters for The Glen's notice-board, and scan photographs to save them and sometimes to create slideshows. Another participant kept photographs of her family on her laptop. A third participant, although she emailed some people, also used the computer to type and print regular letters to post to a friend.

With regard to social media, it was the three eldest participants who used Facebook. Two of them brought up the subject of Twitter without being asked about it in the interview, one of them saying he used it and another saying that she did not use it as she did not know how. Three participants used Skype and a fourth wanted to start using Skype. The participant who used a Macintosh said he belonged to three Mac user groups. Research has shown that elderly people would benefit from using computers not only for information, but also for entertainment, social utility, and business or daily functions (Lawhon & Ennis, 1996). The uses and gratifications theory that frames this study maintains that «audience members actively [select] media products to satisfy a range of needs: new information, entertainment, news, relaxation, and more» (Melkote, 2002: 427).

b) Entertainment and relaxation gratification. Gratification from using computers for entertainment or relaxation was not very prevalent across interviews. Nevertheless, one of the effects of this use was relief from boredom. One participant said: «If I'm not going out I come down in the morning and [use the computer], and then I'll come down again in the afternoon I suppose – two or three times a day, if I'm not going anywhere else» (interview, May 9, 2014). This participant's emphasis that she used the computer only if she was not going out suggested that her computer use was her entertainment and relief from boredom at The Glen.

Another participant said that he played Solitaire on the computer whenever he was put on hold when making a call to a service provider. While this particular situation may not be something that happened very often, this same participant explained that he used the computer to keep himself mentally active. For example, writing had been part of his profession, so after he retired he decided he would write letters to the media and use the dictionary and thesaurus on his computer to help maintain the quality of his language usage.

c) Information and social utility gratifications. Across half of the interviews it emerged that the older

adults obtained gratification from using computers for information. Two of the eldest participants said that during conversations they made mental notes of things they wanted to know more about, and then googled these when they were in front of the computer. According to Chandler and Munday (2011), «using the mass media as conversational currency» is an example of social utility use because it increases «contact with others» and is derived «from a need of individuals for affiliation» (399). Therefore these two participants obtained both information and social utility gratifications from googling information for conversational currency.

These same two participants also read news online. One of them had impaired hearing and used Google to supplement information from songs (like lyrics) and films (like plot revealed in dialogue). According to the older adults, online information was convenient, and helped them «keep track of things» and appreciate more. One of the participants who wanted to use the computer to email more regularly also wanted to start using computers for information –email and information were the only computer uses that were important to him.

Overall, the greatest gratification that the older adults obtained out of computers was from social utility usage. Email and Skype were used to communicate with family and friends both near and far. Email was preferred above SMS because more could be said, above handwritten letters because less could be said and above phone-calls because it was cheaper. The three participants who used Skype found it easy but were not completely satisfied, the most common reason being uneasiness with seeing the other person and being seen.

Social utility via Facebook was more observation than communication. A uses and gratifications study in the USA found that most older adults did not use Facebook for communication, but rather for entertainment; yet, this was still a social utility usage as it included observing friends' Facebook activity (Ancu, 2012). The older adults in my study obtained gratification from viewing news posted on Facebook pages, and even more from viewing photographs posted by family. Some posts provoked a response and brief communication with Facebook friends, but the most significant effect of Facebook use on participants appeared to be a sense of affiliation with family as they followed their lives in photographs. Other examples of computer use that affected the older adults with a higher sense of community with others in society were the Yacht Club newsletters that one participant re-

ceived via email, and the forum discussions that another participant followed within the Mac user groups he was part of.

It becomes apparent that a sense of affiliation or community is linked with the sense of «keeping track of things» that was obtained from getting information from the Internet. As with conversational currency, this reveals a link between the information and social utility uses of computers. The notion has been confirmed through a 2009 survey that found that older adults in Australia who used the Internet for communication, as well as those who used it for information, felt a greater sense of community (Sum & al., 2009). The notion is further supported by this study's findings that the three participants who used Google to find information were also the three participants who used Facebook. And two of them were also members of, respectively, the Yacht Club and the Mac user groups.

These same three participants were the more regular computer users in the study. One of them explained his regular use of the computer: «My wife was ill for 10 years and I looked after her the last four years of her life because she was immobile. And being stuck in the house, not being able to go away too often, [using the computer] was my relief, to keep in touch with what was going on in the rest of the world. So that created a habit that this is the way I keep myself interested. It's just carried on really» (interview, May 9, 2014). This illustrates the point that participants who used computers for information and social utility experienced reduced feelings of loneliness and lower levels of social isolation. Another one of the three participants in question said: «I'm very sold on computers. My life would not be the same without a computer. I would be totally isolated from my family. I mean how often does anybody actually ever call, you know? My life is 100% better because of computers. It would be good anyway because I keep busy but when I don't have it I feel quite bereft» (interview, May 9, 2014).

d) Social networking with and without the Internet. As 1980s and 1990s uses and gratifications researcher, Rubin (as cited in Sherry & Boyan, 2008) specified, «media use is just one of many alternatives people have; thus media competes with other communication to best satisfy needs and motives» (5239).

The older adults in this study made contact with others in society via email. All of them emailed people living in different cities or countries, while half of them also emailed people living nearby – people they also contacted in person from time to time. The older adults described social networking via the Internet as non-intrusive. One participant saw this positively, saying, «I'd prefer to communicate with my son by email because he's got his life to live; he's got his family and I don't want to interfere, so it would be easier to email» (interview, May 9, 2014). For another partici-

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pant, non-intrusive meant distant and she preferred person-to-person communication. A third participant said that although emails came across as stilted, at least they were accurate. Whether viewed positively or negatively, half the participants acknowledged that social networking via the Internet had increased their contact with some people.

The older adults were not so dependent on social networking via the Internet that other forms of human communication were replaced. The participants made phone calls to various people. There was interpersonal contact in The Glen's communal areas; and four of the participants showed significant motivation for going out often and connecting with others in local social locales. Two of the participants still wrote letters to friends who did not use computers. Although it was at times more convenient for some participants to find information online, their contact with others in society outside of computer use was not weakened. Only one of the participants avoided the company of too many people, saying that she was a private person

and that her husband was losing his memory and did not like noise around him.

The older adults were private about their computer use. The Glen's computer area was usually only occupied by one person at a time and the participants did not usually talk with other people about their use of the computers. There were two exceptions. Firstly, there were two participants who from time to time would try to get their husbands interested in what they were doing on the computer. Secondly, five of the six participants would from time to time give or receive help with using computers.

> The participants used games and other media on computers for entertainment and relief from boredom, but these were not main uses and gratifications in the findings. Future research might compare use of computers by different age groups within the older adult age group, as in this study the eldest participants got more uses and gratifications out of computers than the youngest participants.

In the 1990s, research showed that older adults came away from computer skills training courses feeling more familiar with computers and therefore more confident – both about computer use and about their place as older adults in a technological society (Morgan, 1994). One of the participants in this study supported these findings when she spoke about the help she received, and passed on, with using the computers at The Glen:

«They were quite eager for people to learn. Why not? It's not difficult. Now I Skype my brother. I used to contact him by phone, letter –the old fashioned way. Skype is nice. It's nice to be able to see them and chat to them. There's one lady here whose son is on an island off the coast of Spain so I sometimes help her to get through on Skype– not that I'm an expert» (interview, May 9, 2014).

Furthermore, while participants did not usually talk with other people about their use of the computers specifically, there were two participants whose use of computers strengthened their contact with others in society outside of computer use. Similarly in Japan,

Kanayama (2003) found that elderly people are becoming part of virtual communities, increasing social connectedness to others by sharing stories and memories online. The participant who played Scrabble with a friend via Facebook also emailed this friend and met up at the Yacht Club every Friday where some of their topics of conversation would come from their Scrabble game or emails. And a participant who liked to help people in need provided face-to-face counsel with these people and kept in contact with them afterwards via email.

Research conducted in the USA in 2010 quantitatively explored correlations between older adults' Internet use and their social networking outside of Internet use, and added «to the body of research that [suggested] Internet use [could] strengthen social networks» (Hogeboom & al., 2010: 93). The two examples from this study of participants whose use of computers strengthened their contact with others in society outside of computer use also add to this body of research.

5. Conclusions

The main uses and gratifications elderly people get out of computers in South Africa were explored in this study. From in-depth interviews with six residents of The Glen Retirement Hotel it was found that the elderly people used email and social media to keep in contact with family and friends outside of, and sometimes even within the neighborhood. The primary gratification was thus to enhance social interaction, as well as information seeking. Furthermore, keeping in contact meant not only communication, but also observation of activity – like news, photographs and discussions. It was in this computer usage that information and social utility gratifications overlapped. Participants felt connected with society both through communication with and observation of people, and through keeping themselves informed about news and topics that came up in conversation. By using the Internet they communicated with some people more than they had before. Some of the participants felt less isolated and lonely because of their computer use. Nevertheless, use of computers did not weaken their interpersonal contact outside of computer use. Most of the participants used The

Glen's other communal areas more than they used the computer area. Although there were participants who kept in contact with people within the neighborhood via email, this did not replace face-to face communication with these people in local social locales. Instead, in one case it provided topics of conversation (like Scrabble), and in another it allowed communication to continue (beyond one in-person counselling session).

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Notes

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