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Motivation and Competence as Determinant Factors for Improving Employee Performance: A Literature Review Perspective

Abdisattorova Parizoda¹, Rofi Rofaida^{2*}, Yoga Perdana³

¹ Students on Double degree program at Management Study Program Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia and
Tashkent State University of Economics Uzbekistan

²³Lecturer at Program Studi Manajemen, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

*Correspondence: E-mail: rofi.rofaida@upi.edu

ABSTRACT	ARTICLE INFO
<i>This literature review investigates motivation and competence as key determinants of employee performance in modern organizational settings. Analyzing 25 peer-reviewed and theoretical sources published between 2014 and 2024, the study highlights how intrinsic motivation fosters engagement, while competence—encompassing skills, knowledge, and adaptability—enables effective task execution. The findings underscore the synergistic relationship between the two: motivation drives learning, and competence reinforces confidence and performance. The review also emphasizes the role of transformational leadership, supportive organizational culture, and integrated HR practices in aligning motivation and competence. While each construct contributes independently, their interaction proves most impactful in achieving sustained high performance. This review offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners seeking to enhance employee productivity through balanced people-centered strategies. Gaps identified include a lack of longitudinal data and limited research in emerging economies, pointing to areas for further exploration.</i>	Article History: Submitted/Received 11 Aug 2025 First Revised 27 Aug 2025 Accepted 6 Nov 2025 First Available online 23 Jan 2026 Publication Date 30 Jan 2026 Keyword: Competence, Employee performance, Intrinsic motivation, Motivation
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1. INTRODUCTION

Employee performance has long stood at the core of organizational success, yet in today's rapidly evolving work environment—characterized by technological change, globalization, and postpandemic restructuring—it has taken on even greater strategic importance. Companies striving to maintain competitiveness and adaptability are increasingly turning their attention to human capital, particularly the behavioral and cognitive elements that drive performance outcomes. Among these, two fundamental determinants stand out consistently in both theoretical and empirical literature: motivation and competence. Motivation refers to the internal psychological processes and external stimuli that energize, direct, and sustain behavior toward achieving specific goals (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is what pushes an individual to go beyond mere compliance and instead engage proactively in work-related tasks. Motivation can be intrinsic, arising from within the individual—such as the desire for personal growth or mastery—or extrinsic, fueled by rewards, recognition, or external pressure.

Competence, by contrast, is the individual's ability to effectively carry out tasks and responsibilities. It encompasses technical knowledge, cognitive ability, interpersonal skills, and behavioral attributes required for job performance (Ellström, 2020; Mulder, 2014). While motivation answers the “why” of behavior, competence addresses the “how.” Research over the past decade has increasingly acknowledged that these two factors are not isolated influences but are mutually reinforcing. An individual with high competence but low motivation may underperform due to a lack of drive, whereas someone with high motivation but low competence may channel effort inefficiently. This interdependence suggests that optimal employee performance requires both elements to be cultivated and sustained in parallel (Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2020). The dynamic nature of the modern workplace has made this relationship even more significant. The rise of remote work, cross-functional collaboration, and AI-integrated systems has fundamentally altered the skills and psychological resilience required of employees. A study by Wang et al. (2021) emphasized that successful remote work environments depend heavily on self-regulation, a form of intrinsic motivation, combined with digital competencies. In addition, hybrid and gig economy models place greater responsibility on individuals to not only possess up-to-date skills but also manage their own engagement levels without constant supervision. Organizations are responding to this complexity by integrating motivation and competence development into their human resource strategies.

Contemporary HR practices emphasize continuous learning, feedback-driven performance management, and values-based leadership to align employee goals with organizational priorities (Albrecht et al., 2015). For example, competency-based training programs combined with recognition systems have been shown to significantly improve both employee satisfaction and measurable productivity (Jiang & Chen, 2021). This dual approach reflects an understanding that sustainable performance stems not merely from doing the right things but also from doing them well and with enthusiasm. Several theoretical frameworks support the relevance of these two constructs.

Self Determination Theory (SDT) identifies competence as one of three core psychological needs—alongside autonomy and relatedness—that drive motivation and well-being in the workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Goal-setting theory, another widely accepted model, argues that specific and challenging goals enhance performance by increasing motivation, especially when individuals perceive themselves as competent to meet those goals (Locke & Latham, 2019). Both theories imply that motivation and competence are inextricably linked in the process of performance enhancement. At a practical level, numerous recent studies offer compelling evidence of this relationship. Tziner et al. (2021) found that in knowledge-

intensive organizations, motivation and competence were the strongest predictors of employee innovation and task completion. Similarly, Sutanto et al. (2022) in an Indonesian context showed that organizations focusing on both psychological empowerment (a proxy for intrinsic motivation) and technical upskilling reported higher levels of productivity and employee commitment. These findings hold true across industries and geographies, suggesting that the dual influence of motivation and competence is both universal and context-sensitive.

Moreover, the implications extend beyond individual performance. Teams and entire organizational units that score high in both motivational climate and average competence levels tend to show better collaboration, reduced turnover, and greater adaptability during crisis situations (Akkermans et al., 2020). Particularly in post-pandemic recovery, employee resilience—largely driven by motivation and skill agility—has become a critical performance metric in itself. Despite the growing consensus on their importance, motivation and competence are still often siloed [h3]: literature sources can be added in 2025 studied in silos. Many organizational interventions target either skill development or morale-building, without a comprehensive strategy that bridges the two. Additionally, much of the existing literature still relies on outdated performance appraisal methods or ignores sectoral differences in how motivation and competence manifest. For example, what drives a competent teacher may differ from what drives a competent financial analyst, even if both experience motivation similarly.

This literature review aims to address these gaps by synthesizing current findings on motivation and competence, with an emphasis on research published from 2014 to 2024. It will examine how both constructs influence performance independently and interactively, and how organizations can design systems that support both. Through a review of global empirical evidence and theoretical discourse, the paper will explore how organizations can operationalize motivation and competence to enhance productivity, innovation, and employee retention. The urgency of this exploration is underscored by current trends. Digital transformation, the shifting nature of careers, and heightened employee expectations mean that simply hiring competent individuals or offering incentives is no longer sufficient.

Organizations must foster environments where competence is continually developed and motivation is systematically nurtured. As Meyer et al. (2021) argue, the future of performance lies not just in managing tasks but in understanding the people who perform them—what drives them and how capable they are of delivering results. In summary, motivation and competence are no longer optional extras in performance management—they are strategic imperatives. Their intersection offers rich insights for both academic exploration and practical application. This literature review will explore these dimensions in depth, aiming to contribute a comprehensive and up-to-date perspective on the determinants of employee performance

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding how motivation and competence influence employee performance requires a thorough review of empirical and conceptual research across various organizational contexts. Over the past decade, a significant body of literature has explored these constructs, offering insights into their individual contributions and their potential synergy in enhancing workplace outcomes. This section synthesizes key findings to illuminate the mechanisms through which motivation and competence operate, interact, and ultimately affect performance. Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram Motivation has been a central topic in organizational psychology and management studies for decades. Traditional theories

such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory provided foundational understanding, but more recent frameworks have refined these ideas to align with contemporary workplace dynamics. Among the most influential is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes intrinsic motivation as a stronger and more sustainable predictor of performance than extrinsic drivers. Ryan and Deci (2017) argue that when employees perceive autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work environment, they are more likely to exhibit proactive behavior, commitment, and high-quality performance. Empirical studies validate this assertion across a wide range of industries, including healthcare, education, and technology (Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Gagné et al., 2015)

For instance, a study by Hoch et al. (2020) found that motivational factors significantly correlated with both task performance and organizational citizenship behavior, particularly when supported by ethical and empowering leadership. In the context of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wang et al. (2021) demonstrated that intrinsic motivation was crucial in sustaining performance levels amidst reduced supervision and social isolation. These findings underscore the relevance of motivation not only in ideal settings but also under stressful and uncertain conditions.

Parallel to motivation, competence has emerged as an essential construct in both educational and organizational literature. Competence encompasses a combination of cognitive, technical, and interpersonal skills that are necessary for effective performance. The increasing complexity of modern work environments has expanded the definition of competence beyond static knowledge to include adaptability, problem-solving, and continuous learning (Mulder, 2014; Ellström, 2020). In professional settings, competence is often operationalized through performance appraisals, behavioral indicators, or skill certifications. The growing emphasis on upskilling and reskilling—highlighted in global frameworks like the OECD Skills Outlook (2021)—reflects the necessity for organizations to maintain a workforce that is not only qualified but also agile. Recent empirical research provides strong support for the link between competence and performance. For example, Jiang and Chen (2021) demonstrated that teams with a higher average level of job-related competencies consistently outperformed less competent teams in innovation tasks.

Similarly, a multi-industry study by Tziner et al. (2021) showed that technical competence predicted not only task efficiency but also resilience and employee retention. These outcomes were especially pronounced in environments that encouraged feedback and peer learning, suggesting that competence is not merely an individual trait but also a product of organizational culture. The interaction between motivation and competence has been less frequently studied in an integrated framework, yet the literature that does exist points to a synergistic effect. Employees with high motivation and high competence consistently outperform those who score high in only one domain. Sutanto et al. (2022), studying Indonesian SMEs, found that competence moderated the relationship between motivation and performance, meaning that even highly motivated individuals could underperform if their competence was low.

Conversely, competent employees lacking motivation showed disengagement and reduced discretionary effort. This interdependence is supported by theoretical models such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework, which positions motivation as a psychological resource that amplifies the effect of job demands and personal capabilities on performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model has been applied in several large-scale studies, such as the work by Albrecht et al. (2015), which found that when both competence development and motivational drivers were aligned, employees were more resilient, innovative, and committed to organizational goals.

Another dimension explored in the literature is the role of contextual and demographic variables. Research by Cho and Lee (2022) suggests that generational differences influence how motivation and competence relate to performance. Younger employees, especially Gen Z, tend to value intrinsic motivators like purpose and growth, whereas older generations may respond more strongly to job security and recognition. These differences imply that performance interventions must be tailored to specific employee segments. Moreover, cross-cultural studies indicate that cultural values—such as collectivism versus individualism—affect how competence and motivation are perceived and enacted (Hee et al., 2019). For instance, in collectivist societies like Indonesia or Uzbekistan, social motivation and group-based competence assessments may be more effective than purely individual metrics. The literature also highlights the importance of leadership in shaping both motivation and competence. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspirational communication and intellectual stimulation, has been shown to foster both higher motivation and greater competence development (Hoch et al., 2020). Similarly, HR practices that integrate feedback, recognition, and training into a unified system are more successful in enhancing performance than fragmented interventions (Collings et al., 2019). These findings point toward a growing consensus: performance is not a function of isolated variables but rather a product of integrated organizational systems that address both psychological and skill-based needs.

Despite these insights, some gaps persist. Most existing studies adopt cross-sectional designs, limiting the ability to understand how motivation and competence evolve over time. Longitudinal research could better capture the effects of career stages, organizational change, and external shocks like economic downturns or pandemics. Additionally, while many studies measure self-reported motivation or perceived competence, fewer include objective performance metrics or third-party evaluations. The literature would benefit from mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative data with qualitative insights into employee perceptions, behaviors, and workplace dynamics.



Figure 2. Thematic Map of Literature

To conclude this review, the existing literature robustly supports the notion that both motivation and competence are critical—yet often interdependent—determinants of employee performance. While each factor has been studied extensively on its own, integrated analyses are increasingly necessary to reflect the complexity of modern work life. Organizations that invest simultaneously in developing competencies and fostering motivation are better positioned to achieve sustainable performance outcomes. The following sections of this paper will further discuss how these findings can inform effective managerial strategies and organizational policy.

3. METHODS

We This study employs a qualitative literature review approach to explore and synthesize current knowledge on motivation and competence as key determinants of employee performance. The objective of this methodology is not to test hypotheses or measure variables quantitatively, but rather to collect, analyze, and interpret existing scholarly work to develop an integrated conceptual understanding of the topic. This section outlines the research design, selection criteria, data sources, and analysis process applied in this literature review. The review adopts a narrative, integrative design, which allows for the inclusion of both theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from a range of disciplines, including organizational psychology, human resource management, and behavioral economics. This approach was chosen for its ability to accommodate diverse types of sources and research methodologies, thereby offering a broader perspective on the interrelationship between motivation, competence, and performance.

To ensure academic rigor and relevance, data for this literature review was collected from peerreviewed journal articles, books, and academic databases. The primary databases used included:

1. Scopus
2. Web of Science
3. ScienceDirect
4. EBSCOhost
5. Google Scholar

Search terms were structured using Boolean operators and included combinations such as:

1. "Employee motivation" AND "performance"
2. "Workplace competence" OR "employee competence" AND "productivity"
3. "Motivation and competence" AND "organizational outcomes" • "Determinants of employee performance"
4. "Self-determination theory" AND "job performance"

To ensure recentness and relevance, the search was limited to studies published between 2014 and 2024. Older foundational works were included selectively, especially when they represented essential theoretical contributions (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reputable conference papers
2. Studies written in English
3. Research focused on motivation, competence, and employee performance in workplace settings
4. Studies involving qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method designs
5. Theoretical papers and meta-analyses with high citation impact

Exclusion criteria:

1. Articles published before 2014 (unless foundational)
2. Studies focused exclusively on student performance or academic motivation (non-workplace)
3. Non-peer-reviewed articles (e.g., blogs, opinion pieces)
4. Duplicate studies or works with limited methodological transparency.
5. Duplicate studies or works with limited methodological transparency

An initial pool of 112 articles was identified. After screening titles and abstracts, and

removing duplicates, 52 full-text articles were reviewed. Following a thorough eligibility check based on relevance and methodological quality, 25 peer-reviewed and theoretical sources were selected for detailed analysis and synthesis in this paper. Data Extraction and Analysis Data from the selected studies were extracted and organized into a structured matrix that included the following variables:

1. Author(s) and year of publication
2. Type of study (empirical/theoretical/mixed-method)
3. Research design (quantitative/qualitative/longitudinal/case study)
4. Industry/sector studied
5. Key findings on motivation
6. Key findings on competence
7. Identified linkages to employee performance

The analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and emergent themes. Articles were grouped by dominant theme (e.g., intrinsic motivation, competence development, leadership influence) and then cross-analyzed to identify areas of convergence, contradiction, and research gaps. NVivo software was not used, but a manual coding framework was applied for organizing qualitative data into categories. The final synthesis was guided by a conceptual framework that views motivation and competence as interacting drivers of employee performance, moderated by organizational context, leadership style, and cultural setting. As with any qualitative literature review, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the selection of articles was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research from non-English academic contexts. Second, although care was taken to ensure objectivity, the interpretation of qualitative themes remains subjective, dependent on the reviewer's analytical lens. Third, the absence of empirical testing means that the conclusions drawn are inferential rather than statistically validated. However, these limitations are balanced by the depth and breadth of the review, which offers a multi-angle exploration of motivation and competence. The methodological transparency and structured approach applied ensure that the findings presented are both credible and useful for academic and professional audiences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of recent literature on motivation and competence reveals several consistent patterns in their influence on employee performance. While both constructs individually contribute to performance enhancement, their interplay creates a compounded effect, making their integration within organizational practices not only advantageous but essential. This section presents the key findings from the literature and discusses their implications for theory, management, and future research.

A prominent finding is the dual necessity of motivation and competence in achieving high and sustainable performance. Studies consistently demonstrate that employees with both high motivation and high competence are more likely to perform at optimal levels. For example, Sutanto et al. (2022) found that performance outcomes were significantly higher in environments where employees felt motivated and simultaneously possessed job-relevant competencies. Similarly, Tziner et al. (2021) reported that competent employees with intrinsic motivation displayed greater task persistence, creativity, and adaptability—qualities crucial in dynamic and knowledge-driven industries. This dual requirement challenges organizational practices that focus solely on skill acquisition or only on incentive systems. The evidence indicates that motivation and competence function not as substitutes but as complementary drivers. Motivation without competence can lead to misdirected effort, while

competence without motivation can cause underutilization of human capital. Therefore, the discussion shifts from “which is more important” to “how can both be cultivated in tandem.”

Another key finding is the role of intrinsic motivation as a stronger and more sustainable influence on performance compared to extrinsic motivation. While rewards, promotions, and job security continue to play a role, especially in hierarchical or collectivist work cultures, intrinsic motivators—such as purpose, autonomy, and mastery—are increasingly found to predict long-term engagement and innovation. This aligns with the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that work environments satisfying psychological needs foster deeper commitment and higher-quality performance (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Table 1. Comparative Summary Table of Selected Studies

Author(s)	Year	Focus	Method	Key Findings
Ryan & Deci	2017	Self-Determination Theory in the workplace	Theoretical framework	Intrinsic motivation leads to deeper engagement and sustained performance.
Gagné, Deci & Ryan	2015	Integration of meaning and motivation in job roles	Empirical (Quantitative)	Meaningful work enhances intrinsic motivation and job performance.
Van den Broeck et al.	2016	Psychological needs at work (SDT)	Meta-analysis	Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are core drivers of motivation.
Tziner et al.	2021	Leadership, empowerment, and performance	Empirical (Survey)	Empowering leadership enhances both competence and motivation.
Sutanto et al.	2022	Competence, motivation, and SME performance	Empirical (Survey)	Motivation mediates the link between competence and performance.
Wang et al.	2021	Remote work and performance	Empirical (Mixed Methods)	Self-regulation (intrinsic motivation) critical for remote performance.
Ellström	2020	Conceptual analysis of workplace competence	Conceptual review	Competence is dynamic, multi-dimensional, and critical for performance.
Jiang & Chen	2021	Knowledge work, leadership, and team innovation	Quantitative (Team-level)	Competence and transformational leadership together drive innovation.
Hoch et al.	2020	Ethical leadership and work outcomes	Meta-analysis	Motivation is amplified under ethical and empowering leadership.

Author(s)	Year	Focus	Method	Key Findings
Hee et al.	2019	Academic motivation and competence in Malaysian universities	Empirical (Survey)	Both factors significantly affect job satisfaction and teaching effectiveness.

Studies across different sectors and countries have reinforced this perspective. Hoch et al. (2020) observed that ethical and supportive leadership enhanced intrinsic motivation, which in turn positively influenced job performance. Likewise, in remote working contexts, Wang et al. (2021) found that self-motivated employees were better able to maintain productivity despite the absence of traditional supervision or peer interaction. This suggests that in flexible and decentralized work arrangements, cultivating intrinsic motivation may be even more important than ever before. In parallel, the literature confirms that competence is no longer static or purely technical; it is increasingly seen as multidimensional and dynamic. Beyond basic technical skills, modern competence includes emotional intelligence, critical thinking, digital literacy, and the capacity for continuous learning. These competencies not only support direct task execution but also underpin successful adaptation to organizational change. Ellström (2020) emphasizes that competence development is not a one-time training event but an ongoing process that must be embedded into everyday work experiences.

This dynamic nature of competence necessitates a shift in HR practices. Organizations must invest in ecosystems that support learning and knowledge sharing, rather than relying solely on formal training programs. Competency models are evolving to include behavioral and psychological dimensions, enabling a more holistic understanding of what it means to be a "high-performing" employee in today's complex work environments (Mulder, 2014; Collings et al., 2019). An important theme emerging from the reviewed studies is the significant role of leadership and organizational culture in aligning motivation and competence. Transformational and empowering leadership styles have been found to foster both motivational engagement and competence development simultaneously. Leaders who encourage autonomy, provide constructive feedback, and model continuous learning create a culture where employees are both willing and able to perform (Jiang & Chen, 2021; Albrecht et al., 2015).

Moreover, the reviewed studies suggest that organizational systems and structures can either facilitate or hinder the motivation–competence–performance nexus. For example, performance appraisal systems that focus only on short-term outputs may undermine intrinsic motivation, while rigid job designs may restrict opportunities for competence application and growth. In contrast, performance systems that incorporate developmental feedback, individualized learning paths, and meaningful recognition tend to enhance both motivation and competence over time. From a cross-cultural standpoint, findings show variability in how motivation and competence are perceived and operationalized. In some collectivist cultures, social recognition and group cohesion serve as powerful motivators, while competence may be framed more in terms of group-based efficacy rather than individual achievement. This was evident in the work of Hee et al. (2019) and Sutanto et al. (2022), who examined employee performance in Southeast Asia and highlighted the importance of culturally tailored motivation strategies. These findings underline the need for managers to be sensitive to cultural contexts when designing performance-enhancement programs.

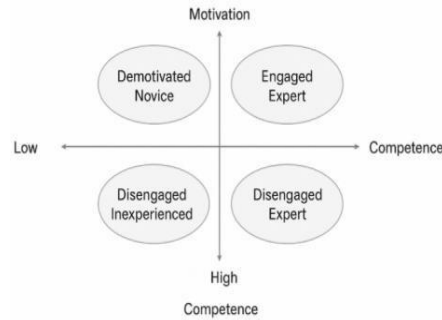


Figure 3. Integrated Motivation–Competence Model

The reviewed literature also emphasizes the interconnectedness of employee well-being, competence, and motivation. Employees who feel competent in their roles report higher job satisfaction and lower stress levels, especially when their motivation is supported by meaningful work and supportive leadership (Meyer et al., 2021). This implies that enhancing competence and motivation is not just a matter of productivity—it is also a matter of sustainability and well-being. Organizations that ignore these factors may face higher burnout rates, turnover, and disengagement. Despite these insights, several gaps and challenges persist. A notable limitation across the literature is the overreliance on cross-sectional and self-reported data, which may limit causal inference. Longitudinal studies that track changes in motivation, competence, and performance over time are still relatively rare.

Moreover, empirical research in certain sectors, such as manufacturing, public administration, and informal economies, remains underrepresented. Future research would benefit from more diverse sampling, sectoral focus, and triangulation of data sources. Another area in need of attention is the interaction effect of organizational variables such as team dynamics, digital transformation, and policy environments. As organizations increasingly adopt hybrid work models and digital platforms, the traditional dynamics of motivation and competence are shifting. Digital competence, in particular, is becoming a new baseline requirement, with implications for hiring, training, and retention strategies (Wang et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the findings highlight that motivation and competence are deeply intertwined constructs that collectively shape employee performance. Their influence is dynamic, contextdependent, and mediated by factors such as leadership, culture, and organizational design. For organizations aiming to improve performance, the implication is clear: isolated interventions are unlikely to succeed. Instead, integrated approaches that consider psychological, cognitive, and structural dimensions offer the greatest potential for impact. Aligning motivation and competence in practice requires not only strategy and investment but also empathy and foresight in leadership. These conclusions serve as a springboard for the final section, which will outline practical recommendations and theoretical contributions.



Figure 4. SWOT or JD-R Application Matrix

5. CONCLUSION

This literature review has explored the critical roles of motivation and competence as determinant factors in improving employee performance. Together, these two constructs are mutually reinforcing. High motivation fuels the desire to learn and improve, while increasing competence enhances confidence and feeds intrinsic motivation—a virtuous cycle. This interplay is most effective in organizational environments that offer not only resources for skill development but also leadership support, feedback mechanisms, and a culture that values continuous improvement and employee wellbeing. In conclusion, motivation and competence are not optional features of high-performing employees—they are foundational. Their proper alignment and development should be at the core of any strategic effort to improve individual and organizational outcomes in the modern workplace. As the future of work continues to evolve, organizations that master this dual focus will not only perform better but also build more adaptive, resilient, and satisfied workforces.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

This article is free from conflict of interest and free from plagiarism

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