




Pest, Not Enemy: Metaphor in COVID-19 News Reports in Indonesian Newspapers

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Abstract. War metaphor is frequently used in the communication about COVID-19 pandemic in many countries, but it is considered inappropriate because it presents a disproportionate picture of COVID-19 pandemic. This research attempts to identify conceptual metaphors in COVID-19 pandemic news report in the Indonesian national news media: *Liputan 6* and *BBC News Indonesia* during the year 2021. *Liputan 6* reports domestic news, while BBC News Indonesia relays news from international news agencies. The analysis applies Kovecses's Conceptual Metaphor and Van Dijk's Discourse Analysis. The results reveal different forms of metaphors in the two media. The domestic news report about COVID-19 pandemic tends to use metaphors related to the local cultural background of Indonesia as an agricultural and archipelagic country: farming and sea. It concludes that Indonesian society tend to perceive COVID-19 pandemic as pest that needs to be controled rather than an enemy to be destroyed in war.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, conceptual metaphor, cultural background, mass media.

1 Introduction

Previous research on COVID-19 pandemic metaphors shows a tendency to use 'war' as a tenor, thus, commonly labeled "war metaphor" (Giorgis, Semenets, & Todorova, 2023; Isaacs & Priesz, 2021; Marron, Dizon, Symington, Thompson, & Rosenberg, 2020; Molho, 2021; Musu, 2020; Panzeri, Di Paola, & Domaneschi, 2021; Semino, 2021; Singh, 2020; Silverman, Head, & Beckman, 2020). However, the use of war metaphors is considered inappropriate because it presents a disproportionate picture of COVID-19 pandemic. If the war metaphor is deemed inappropriate in the COVID-19 pandemic discourses, does the COVID-19 pandemic news in the Indonesian national media also utilize the war metaphor, or choose a different alternative conceptual metaphor?

News about COVID-19 pandemic was constantly published during its outbreak in national newspapers both in print and online. Aside from being a global issue, COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as a real threat for Indonesia by various levels of Indonesia society. People have very high curiosity, keeping them to update their knowledge about COVID-19 pandemic case developments, government policies to stop the pandemic, vaccine availability, and so on. The amount of news from various sources other than

newspapers, including social media, often caused confusion of information. The spread of hoaxes on social media was difficult to control. In that situation, national newspapers is more trustworthy sources of reports about COVID-19 pandemic not only because of its transparency of the news source, but also for its presentation which is generally carried out with better accountability.

COVID-19 pandemic is a new type of disease. Due to unfamiliarity of the Indonesian people with the disease, there are some constraints in making an accurate depiction, especially limited linguistic resources available for the description, and people's background knowledge about viruses. Therefore, the description is highly dependent on the reader's ability to reason, and the available forms of expression for making an analogy. Innovations in presenting news about COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, can only be made within certain boundaries so that the average readers can understand. An analogy to something familiar is often chosen as a strategy that may help in describing something alien and abstract. To this end, metaphors bring alien and abstract entities closer to the common sense of the target readers. With metaphors, the intangible becomes easier to imagine. Since metaphors are strongly influenced by the culture of the people, there is a possibility of differences in the choice of metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic among different cultures.

As a result, COVID-19 pandemic is depicted through metaphors that vary in different parts of the world. Some metaphors are universal, while others are culture specific. Recent studies on COVID-19 pandemic metaphors show the use of war, firefighting and travel metaphors to describe COVID-19 (Craig, 2020; Musu, 2020; Semino, 2021; Silverman, Head, & Beckman, 2020; Singh, 2020). The use of war metaphors has been criticized for its negative implications (Musu, 2020; Marron, Dizon, Symington, Thompson, & Rosenberg, 2020; Panzeri, Di Paola, & Domaneschi, 2021; Isaacs & Priesz, 2021). "While highly appealing as a tool of political rhetoric, the war metaphor hides several pitfalls that, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, are particularly dangerous." (Musu, 2020). Metaphor as a linguistic representation of something outside the language can influence actions. Therefore, the metaphorization of Covid-19 pandemic must be done carefully (Musu, 2020).

2 Literature Review

Linguistic studies on COVID-19 pandemic ventured into different types of discourse: news report, posters, urban signs, and political speeches. Nursanti, Andriyanti, & Wijaya (2024) study the metaphors related to COVID-19 pandemic used in three online newspapers in Bahasa Indonesia with local and national coverage. The study found that Indonesians are rich in lexical items as source domains to conceptualize things related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They map the conceptual metaphors into WARFARE, DESTRUCTIVE FORCE, COLOR SPECTRUM, and MOVEMENT. The dominance of lexical items in WARFARE and DESTRUCTIVE FORCE categories implies that the metaphors were used to raise people's awareness that they were in a difficult situation and needed to fight the virus together.

Bagna (2023) investigates how and in what terms the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the Italian Linguistic Landscape, considered both in its entirety, as a single body that, regardless of local specificities, responded to and jointly reflected on the shared shock. He also analyzed the evolution of COVID-19 pandemic discourses since the pandemic broke out. His diachronic analysis made it possible to identify, on the one hand, points in common with the communication strategies in the different phases, both at a commercial and regulatory level. On the other hand, strong differences emerged in the bottom-up representations, characterized in the first phase by discourses of resilience, tolerance, hope, solidarity, and patriotism, and in the second and third phases by disillusionment, despair, and protest.

Munandar (2020) studies verbal offence on the posters of Covid 19 pandemic. The findings reveal that the posters produced by the grassroot contain verbal offence against marginalized groups resulting from inaccurate understanding of the pandemic. The anxiety and disappointment are addressed to the marginalized group in society instead of the government which deserve blame due to a slow response to the spread of the pandemic.

Giorgis, Semenets, & Todorova (2023) study how war metaphor is mobilized as rhetoric in public discourse—political speeches in particular. They investigate representation of military language in the official communication during the COVID-19 crisis. The finding reveals that political leaders of many countries used war rhetoric when talking about COVID-19 pandemic. From a cross-cultural perspective, though the military discourse propagated in some countries presents some common threads—an appeal to unity, the mobilization against a common threat, the rhetoric construction (or reconstruction) of a specific national identity, the legitimization of security measures—the historical, cultural, and political context of each country framed and signified the war metaphor in different ways, following different strategies and enacting different argumentative functions.

Studies on Covid 19 pandemic also explore socio-cultural resilience. Khodamoradi, Maddahi, Ahadi, & Besharat (2024) conducted a review of literature related on cultural resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Their finding reveals the capabilities that culture provides through the various components that enable us to have the ability to adapt, change conditions, and improve performance in critical situations. Based on the finding, they conceptualized that cultural resilience could include these components: belongingness and rootedness, trust, commitment, sense of pride, and attachment. They conclude that Cultural resilience can be considered as the ability to adapt and deal with a crisis with the help of historical styles, myths, customs, and cultural beliefs.

Molho (2021) reported that cultural policy makers in Singapore and Doha strived to use culture to project positive values both internally and externally. These values are exemplarity, solidarity and reflexivity.

First, culture had to show exemplarity. In Singapore, the Ministry of Communications and Information supported local illustrators to highlight that everyone can play their part in overcoming Covid-19 pandemic by adhering to Circuit Breaker measures like social distancing, wearing masks, and working from home, and to encourage Singaporeans to stay resilient and support each other during these trying times. Second, culture had to showcase solidarity. As the pandemic in Singapore in the earlier stage

affected mostly migrant workers in dormitories, many initiatives of solidarity have been put forward. Finally, the cultural sector has contributed to the heritagization of the pandemic: documenting, assembling material evidence and testimonies about these exceptional times and shaping a collective narrative. Molho concludes that in both Doha and Singapore, culture has been mobilized as a soft instrument to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Through the projection of a coherent and linear discourse, it serves to alleviate the sense of political uncertainty and the tensions generated by the pandemic.

The present study examines the choice of metaphor of Covid-19 pandemic used by two National Newspapers and its effect on the cultural resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia.

2.1 Problems

Recent studies on metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic show a variety of metaphors used in the news report about COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of metaphors is certainly influenced by the cultural background. In the era of technology that allows the flow of information from outside to enter Indonesia so freely, is there an influence of metaphors from other cultures in the selection of metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic by the Indonesian media?

To be able to examine these issues, this research formulates two research questions.

1. How do Indonesian newspapers depict COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Are there similarities and differences with the Covid-19 metaphors used in English-language media?

In line with these research questions, the purpose of this study is to compare COVID-19 metaphors in international and national media to find out the similarities and differences in describing COVID-19 pandemic in national (Indonesian) and international (English) media.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study applies theories related to layer of meaning and metaphor-culture relation. It uses discourse analysis as the approach.

- a. Layer of Meaning “first order and second order meaning”

The determination of a language unit as a metaphor is based on the distinction of two levels of meaning, namely the first level and the second level (Kittay, 1984). Metaphors are in the second level of meaning and are highly dependent on the context of speech.

- b. The Relationship between Metaphor and Culture

Kövecses (2008) explains the relationship between metaphor and culture that the conceptualization of metaphor is influenced by two pressures simultaneously, namely the insistence of embodiment, and the insistence of context. Meanwhile, the context is determined by local culture. Kövecses offers a detailed explanation in the following quote.

Metaphorical conceptualization in natural situations occurs under two simultaneous pressures: the pressure of embodiment and the pressure of context.

Context is determined by local culture. This dual pressure essentially amounts to our effort to be coherent both with the body and culture — coherent both with universal embodiment and the culture-specificity of local culture in the course of metaphorical conceptualization. We can achieve this in some cases, but in others it is either embodiment or cultural specificity that plays the more important role. Context may be characterized by physical, social, cultural, discourse, etc. aspects, and it consists of such factors as the setting, topic, audience, and medium, which can all influence metaphorical conceptualization

Kovecses gives example from previous research which showed that physical context may systematically shape the way we think metaphorically: the ECONOMY IS HEALTH metaphor is systematically more frequent in the winter than in the summer. ECONOMY IS HEALTH is a potentially universal metaphor whose use varies according to the physical context of metaphorical conceptualization. Which metaphor is used in a particular situation does not only depend on which (potentially) universal metaphor is available in connection with the given target domain for the expression of a given meaning but also on the setting and topic of the situation in which the metaphorical conceptualization takes place

c. Discourse Analysis

Discourse is not formed in an empty social space. It exists in the context of various kinds of social relations. Critical Discourse Analysis focuses its study on the inequality of relations through the approach of how the role of a discourse towards power, whether it reproduces or challenges the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance (van Dijk, 1993). What van Dijk means by power is the use of social power by certain elites, institutions or groups that result in inequality. The discourse on COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia records traces of social inequality, especially cultural inequality. COVID-19 pandemic is an international issue that is loaded with the political and economic interests of the ruling group. The choice of metaphor for COVID-19 pandemic in the news is very likely to be controlled by that power, so that local people do not have the opportunity to voice their own thoughts.

3 Methods

The primary data of this study are sentences containing metaphor of COVID-19 pandemic obtained from news reports about COVID-19 pandemic in the National online newspapers. The selection of newspapers is based on the national category, namely *Liputan 6* and *BBC News Indonesia*. From each of these newspapers, 10 news articles about COVID-19 pandemic were taken during the year 2021. The identification of metaphors in the news is based on the theory of “first order and second order meaning” (Kittay, 1984), which is then connected to the theory of ‘conceptual metaphor’ (Kövecses, 2008). The primary data collection and analysis were assisted by the AntConc software (Anthony, 2019). The secondary data are research results on

COVID-19 pandemic metaphors used in news reports written in English targeted for English -speaking communities. This data is obtained by extracting research results published in the form of journal articles or research reports that can be accessed via the internet.

A comparison of the primary data and the secondary is conducted to find out the similarities and differences in metaphors used by Indonesian people and people of other cultures. Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach is used in the interpretation of whether the similarities and differences in COVID-19 metaphors used in national media coverage are part of an effort to reproduce, or conversely challenge power,

4 Results

Previous research on metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic in English-language media show a range of variations: military metaphors (war), disease metaphors (HIV AIDS) and economic metaphors (Craig, 2020). The metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic found in the Indonesian media show these variations: sea metaphors, economic metaphors, game metaphors, farming metaphors, disease metaphors, and military metaphors.

Table 1. metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic in the Indonesian national Newspapers

Initial Idea (vehicle)	Reference (Tenor)	Lexicon marker
COVID-19 attack	Ocean (Sea)	waves
cases of COVID-19 pandemic	Economic (commodity price)	up, down, surge, drop,
	Game (match)	lead, rank
COVID-19 virus	Farming (Pest)	spread, engulf, eradicate, control, prevent, rampage
	Disease	infectious
COVID-19 handling	Military (war)	strategy

The Table shows that Indonesian media also uses Military, Economic, and Disease metaphors in reporting COVID-19 pandemic. These metaphors are found in the news coverage of BBC News Indonesia which relay reports from BBC world news. However, other kinds of metaphor are also used: Ocean, Farming, and Game metaphors which reflect commonly shared experiences in the daily lives among Indonesian people. The following are data samples of each tenor presented in table 1.

4.1 Covid-19 is Sea

The sea is associated with a mystery for us even today since scientists have not completely explored lives underneath the sea. We can see only the surface: the vast expanse of water and the incessant waves coming ashore. Similarly, Corona virus is a new type of virus that scientists do not have a comprehensive understanding about its

characteristics. As a result, we do not have the ability to mutate the virus, to stop its spread, and to prevent casualties. The characteristic of the COVID-19 virus, which is difficult to contain, is similar with ocean wave, which is powerful and impossible to stop.

- (1) Last August, Japan was **hit** by the fifth and largest **wave** of the coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic last year. (BBC News Indonesia, 26/11/21)
- (2) We must learn from the second **wave** yesterday, (Liputan 6, 1/12/21)
- (3) Reflecting on the second **wave** of COVID-19 that **hit** Indonesia in July 2021, the speed of the Delta variant, according to Miko, is very fast to spread (Liputan 6, 1/12/21)

4.2 Covid-19 is a Commodity

Economic activity takes place everywhere in rural and urban areas in its basic or advanced forms. The basic form is exchanging goods, and the advanced one is e-commerce facilitated by the internet. Some commodities have volatile prices. Like commodities, COVID-19 pandemic cases increase (raise) and decrease (fall).

- (4) Scientists know that the **sharp rise** in Covid-19 cases is due to the Delta variant, but they still don't understand why cases are **falling sharply** while other countries continue to struggle with rising cases. (BBC News Indonesia, 26/11/21)
- (5) There are several hypotheses behind the **drop** in cases amid the spread of the Delta variant. (BBC News Indonesia, 26/11/21)
- (6) The **spike** in cases is due to the Delta variant sweeping across the world, including Japan. (BBC News Indonesia, 26/11/21)

4.3 Covid-19 is a Pest

Pests can vary in forms: viruses, fungi, or insects. Because of their destructive nature, humans try to eradicate them using various ways. The same applies to the COVID-19 virus, which endangers human life. In many countries, COVID-19 has claimed a huge number of lives and caused panic in society.

- (7) The Ministry of Transportation is tightening international entry points at air, sea and land transportation nodes to **prevent** Omicron variants from **entering** Indonesia. (Liputan 6, 30/11/21)
- (8) Indonesia is taking quick steps to temporarily **close the entry points** for foreign nationals from 11 countries where the **spread** of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 coronavirus has been detected. (Liputan 6, 30/11/21)
- (9) The Omicron variant cases have **spread** to several countries. (Liputan 6, 30/11/21)
- (10) One day after the report to WHO, South Africa immediately announced a new variant of the covid-19 virus that **broke out** in one of their states on November 25, 2021. (Liputan 6, 30/11/21)
- (11) ... this is to prevent and keep the pandemic **under control** in this country (Liputan 6, 1/12/2021)

4.4 Covid-19 is a Disease

Diseases and pests can be considered the same. However, pests are more commonly understood to affect plants, not humans. Diseases, on the other hand, are more general and affect humans. Therefore, in data analysis, it is necessary to differentiate. The metaphor of COVID-19 as a disease is a common one, especially since COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic. The COVID-19 virus can be transmitted from one person to another, and the commonly used word is 'contagious'.

- (12) "The Delta variant is highly **contagious** in Japan compared with other variants" (BBC News Indonesia, 26/11/21)
- (13) Due to the combination of mutations from the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, AY.23, and AY.4 variants, it is no wonder the Omicron variant is so highly **contagious** (Liputan 6, 1/12/21).

4.5 Covid-19 Prevention is a War

War metaphors were used in the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in China. Efforts to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus are described as a war. In warfare, strategies are used to win the battle, so to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, strategies are launched that are expected to produce optimal results.

- (14) It may not be easy to shift to what experts call a **mitigation strategy**, which focuses on reducing deaths rather than cases. (BBC News Indonesia, 6/8/21)
- (15) Fellow countries with zero Covid **strategies** such as Australia and Singapore have recently announced plans to target vaccination rates of 80%. (BBC News Indonesia, 6/8/21)
- (16) But a long-term zero Covid **strategy** also has risks. (BBC News Indonesia, 6/8/21)
- (17) An increasingly heated **battle**. (BBC News Indonesia, 6/8/21)

5 Discussion

The old generations of Indonesian people are familiar with *pageblug*, a somewhat mysterious phenomenon where many people fall sick and then die within few days after the contamination. The closest equivalence for *pageblug* in English is plague. The contagious diseases categorized into *pageblug* during the the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia are *pes* (bubonic), *cacar* (pox), *malaria* (malaria), *kolera* (cholera), dan *pathek* (yaws) (Adji & Priyatmoko, 2021). These diseases are contagious, a shared nature with the Coronavirus of COVID-19 pandemic. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is new and very different from the concept of *pageblug* in the Indonesian cultural context. The term 'pandemic' is a relatively new term and becomes widely used in Indonesia only recently in the media. Given that the Indonesian media rely on international news media for reporting various events happening in other countries, the influence of the western media is inevitable, such as in the use of COVID-19 metaphors. A completely new term or concept that does not match any experiences in the local (indigenous) context will cause problems of understanding. It may create confusion. Metaphor helps create a familiar picture of that strange concept. If the chosen metaphor is in line with the local

context, local people will gain a better understanding. In other words, metaphors that are culture specific of Indonesian context will help Indonesian people make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data sources of this study can be divided into 2 types of news: domestic news and foreign news (mostly translated news from BBC world news). Domestic news is published in *Liputan 6*, while foreign news is published in *BBC News Indonesia*. In compliant with the principle of faithful translation, the translated news published on *BBC News Indonesia* often shows the presence of foreign cultural elements, including metaphors. Although the metaphors found in *BBC News Indonesia*'s coverage are intelligible for Indonesian readers, they may be in the forms of conceptual metaphors different from those used in the coverage of COVID-19 in Indonesia through *Liputan 6*. For example, the conceptual metaphor "STOPPING COVID-19 IS A WAR" in *BBC News Indonesia*'s coverage is not found in *Liputan 6*'s coverage. *Liputan 6* prefers the conceptual metaphor "COVID-19 VIRUS IS A PEST". Despite its destructive nature, pests are not as destructive as war to human beings. The efforts of pest eradication by farmers is not comparable to fighting enemies by warriors in the battle field. War has a strongly negative connotation of cruelty against humans.

The identification of conceptual metaphors describing warfare as in the *BBC News Indonesia* coverage support the findings of previous research, namely the use of war metaphors in COVID-19 discourse (Isaacs & Priesz (2021); Marron, Dizon, Symington, Thompson, & Rosenberg (2020); Musu (2020); Panzeri, Di Paola, & Domaneschi (2021); Semino (2021); Singh (2020); and Silverman, Head, & Beckman (2020)), and in line with Craig (2020) regarding pandemic metaphors. In the *BBC News Indonesia* coverage, the Chinese government's efforts to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus were described as a "hot battle" with multiple interpretations, namely: a fight between the government (humans) against the virus, and a fight between the government and some groups in society who do not support the government's programs. These groups, traumatized by new cases due to the mutation of the COVID-19 virus, tend to distrust government programs.

Meanwhile, in its coverage of COVID-19 pandemic which focuses the local context of Indonesian society, *Liputan 6* describes the government's efforts to stop, or at least to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, using a 'softer' metaphor underlying the idea of "blocking the entry of pests" and then "controlling the pests that have entered the territory so that they do not make a violent attack". The choice of pest metaphor over war metaphor is in line with the philosophy of 'living in harmony with nature' that Indonesian people cherish. Apart from that, Indonesia is basically an agricultural country where the people have acquired farming-related wisdoms, including pest and pest control. War is too violent for the Indonesian culture which cherishes the value of "living in harmony with nature", so reporting COVID-19 pandemic using war metaphor which create a picture of massive destruction on both sides is intimidating. On the contrary, describing Corona virus as a pest may sound less decisive, but it does not cause panic leading to irrational acts. It creates sufficiently a sense of crisis that builds alert against the spread of coronavirus.

Indonesia is also an archipelagic country. People are familiar with ocean, and those living in the coastal areas have wisdoms related with sea and sea-faring activities. Thus,

describing COVID-19 pandemic using Sea metaphor is relevant with the Indonesian context. People know that waves are destructive: they can erode the coast slowly, but the erosion can be put under control with breakwater. Unless the wave is Tsunami, the level of destruction is not catastrophic. Like pest metaphor, wave metaphor also sufficiently makes people alert but does not cause panic and irrational behaviors.

Commodity metaphor is a universal metaphor. All cultures around the globe engage in economic activities, for instance selling and buying goods in various forms. Both news media use a commodity metaphor. It implies a commonly shared perception among countries about the development of the COVID-19 case. The conceptual metaphor "COVID CASE IS A COMMODITY" is realized through the words 'soaring', 'drop', 'rising sharply', 'falling sharply' as prices are fluctuated- going up/down. The similarity in using this metaphor to depict the development of Covid-19 cases is likely motivated by a uniform view of changes in quantities conveniently expressed as additions or subtractions. The easily observable changes in quantities are related to production, supply, and buying and selling. The term "price" emerges in the buying and selling activities, which sometimes increases, stabilizes, and decreases. The degree of rise and fall are often indicated by the adjective sharp, or other synonymous words, namely 'soaring' and 'drop'.

The use of Sea, Farming, and Commodity metaphors give positive implications to the Indonesian cultural resilience. These metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic are in line with the Indonesian cultural background of both agricultural and archipelagic country. Apart from giving a more realistic picture about COVID-19 pandemic which is a new phenomenon for Indonesians, these metaphors create sufficient sense of crises which do not necessarily lead to panic and irrational responses. During a time of crisis, our emotions are vulnerable. A peaceful atmosphere and rational acts are needed to cope with adversity. The use of metaphors that create too violent a picture of COVID-19 pandemic such as war metaphor may cause panic and irrationality that do more harm to people. Therefore, war metaphor frequently used in foreign news reporting media should be avoided in news report in Indonesian context.

6 Conclusion

In lights of the research results, it is clear that metaphors about COVID-19 vary according to the cultural background of the users, highlighting the influence of culture in the choice of metaphors. The cultural background of Indonesia which is both agricultural and archipelagic country affect the way Indonesian perceive COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon which requires proportional understanding such that it does not bring harm to the people. The Sea, Farming, and Commodity metaphors of COVID-19 pandemic create a more realistic picture of the pandemic. The properties of pests and the properties of sea waves have been recorded in the memory and lexical vocabulary of Indonesian people, making it easier to identify the ground (similarity between vehicle and tenor). The economic activities in the form of buying and selling are also indirectly related to the rural life of Indonesian people. These metaphors is sufficient to build a sense of crises but do not lead to unnecessary panic and

irrational responses. Therefore, these metaphors help keep the value of living harmoniously with nature among Indonesian people and can strengthen immunity by preventing emotional harm.

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