

Social Exchange Theory: Exploring Reciprocity, Equity, and Relationship Management in Diverse Contexts

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Abstract

Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a foundational framework for understanding human relationships, emphasizing the dynamics of reciprocity, equity, and the management of interpersonal interactions. This paper explores the application of SET across various contexts, examining how costs and rewards influence behavior and decision-making within social, emotional, and organizational exchanges. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, the study highlights how SET informs relationship management practices, emphasizing the importance of balanced exchanges for sustaining positive interactions. It also investigates cultural limitations and challenges, such as the risk of oversimplification, in applying SET to diverse social environments. By bridging theoretical insights with real-world applications, this work underscores the complexity of social exchange in both personal and professional relationships, offering new perspectives on how communication and mutual influence shape human connections. The findings call for a more nuanced understanding of equity and reciprocity, especially in cross-cultural settings, and suggest practical implications for improving relationship dynamics in academic, social, and organizational spheres.

Keywords: Reciprocity, Emotional exchange, Organizational behavior, Transactional relationships, Cultural limitations

Introduction:

Social Exchange Theory (SET), first articulated by George Homans in the mid-20th century, has become a cornerstone in the study of interpersonal relationships, organizational behavior, and communication. At its core, SET posits that human interactions are based on an exchange of resources—whether tangible or intangible—and that individuals engage in relationships with the expectation of receiving benefits that outweigh the costs. Over time, the theory has evolved, expanding beyond its initial focus on economic transactions to encompass emotional, social, and even cultural exchanges, making it a versatile framework for analyzing a wide range of relational dynamics.

One of the central tenets of SET is the idea of *reciprocity*—the expectation that individuals will return favors or benefits in kind, which fosters trust and cooperation. However, reciprocity is not always symmetrical, and the balance of costs and rewards plays a crucial role in determining the satisfaction and

longevity of relationships. The concept of *equity*, or the perceived fairness of these exchanges, is similarly vital in understanding relational outcomes. Imbalances in equity, whether in personal, academic, or organizational contexts, can lead to feelings of resentment or disengagement, ultimately undermining the health of relationships.

This paper delves into the application of SET in diverse contexts, exploring how the theory informs relationship management strategies across social, emotional, and organizational spheres. It also critically examines the cultural limitations of SET, highlighting how its assumptions may not always align with the norms and values of different societies. Moreover, the risk of oversimplifying complex human behavior by relying too heavily on economic metaphors is addressed, with a call for a more nuanced understanding of relational dynamics. By exploring these themes, this study aims to offer a comprehensive view of how Social Exchange Theory can be leveraged to foster better communication, improve organizational behavior, and navigate the complexities of relationship management in an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world.

Background of the Study

Social Exchange Theory (SET), initially developed by sociologist George Homans in the 1950s, offers a framework for understanding human behavior in the context of relationships. Rooted in economic principles, SET posits that social interactions are fundamentally driven by the exchange of resources, where individuals seek to maximize rewards (such as affection, support, or material benefits) while minimizing costs (such as effort, time, or emotional distress). This transactional perspective has been widely applied to analyze a variety of relational contexts, from personal relationships to organizational behavior, and has become a fundamental theory in social psychology, communication studies, and management research.

One of the core principles of SET is *reciprocity*—the idea that social interactions are governed by the expectation of mutual benefit. Reciprocity plays a pivotal role in relationship development, as individuals tend to form stronger bonds when they perceive that exchanges are fair and balanced. However, the equilibrium of give-and-take is often influenced by multiple factors, including emotional investment, communication patterns, and cultural norms, making the concept of *equity*—a perceived fairness in the distribution of rewards and costs—equally important. When the balance of exchange is perceived as inequitable, whether due to exploitation or neglect, relationship satisfaction and trust can deteriorate.

Despite its broad applicability, SET has not been without its critics. Some scholars argue that the theory is overly simplistic, reducing complex human interactions to a series of rational calculations. Additionally, SET's assumptions are often based on Western notions of individualism, which may not translate well to collectivist or interdependent cultures. As globalization continues to reshape social and organizational landscapes, it is increasingly important to examine how SET operates across different cultural contexts. In particular, the ways in which reciprocity, equity, and relationship management are understood and enacted can vary significantly depending on societal values, norms, and expectations.

Furthermore, while SET has been widely utilized in personal and professional relationship studies, its integration into organizational behavior and cross-cultural communication remains underexplored. In academic exchanges, for instance, scholars may engage in cooperative relationships based on mutual benefit, but the nature of these exchanges can differ significantly across disciplines, institutions, and cultures. Similarly, in organizational settings, the application of SET to understand leadership dynamics,

team cooperation, and workplace negotiations often overlooks the influence of cultural diversity and the potential for inequitable exchanges.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by exploring the nuanced ways in which Social Exchange Theory applies to various relational contexts—social, emotional, and organizational—and by critically examining the cultural limitations of the theory. By addressing the complex interplay between reciprocity, equity, and relationship management, this research aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of SET, moving beyond oversimplified models and contributing to a more nuanced perspective on human relationships in both personal and professional spheres. Through this investigation, the study aspires to provide valuable insights for improving communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution across diverse settings.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has long been a central framework in the social sciences, influencing fields as diverse as sociology, psychology, communication, and organizational behavior. At its core, SET suggests that human relationships are driven by a cost-benefit analysis in which individuals seek to maximize rewards (such as emotional support, resources, or social approval) while minimizing costs (such as time, energy, or emotional strain). This perspective positions individuals as rational actors who engage in interactions with the aim of achieving outcomes that are perceived as favorable, or at least equitable, to all parties involved.

Developed by George Homans and later expanded by scholars like Peter Blau and Richard Emerson, SET draws from economics and behavioral psychology to explain the dynamics of human interaction. The theory hinges on the idea of *reciprocity*, which is the mutual exchange of resources between individuals. Reciprocity serves as the foundation for cooperation, trust, and the development of positive relationships, both in personal and professional settings. However, reciprocity is not always perfectly balanced, and SET posits that individuals continuously assess whether the rewards they receive from a relationship justify the costs they incur. When an exchange is perceived as unbalanced—either when rewards outweigh costs or when costs exceed rewards—individuals may feel dissatisfaction, disengagement, or even resentment, which can ultimately undermine the relationship.

Equity, a critical component of SET, is the notion that individuals seek fairness in their exchanges. Equity theory, an offshoot of SET, suggests that people feel most satisfied in relationships when the ratio of benefits to costs is equal for both parties. If one person feels they are contributing more or receiving less than their counterpart, feelings of inequality may lead to negative emotions such as frustration or anger, and in extreme cases, a breakdown in the relationship may occur. This concept of equity has profound implications for a wide range of social interactions, from romantic relationships to work environments, where perceptions of fairness—or lack thereof—can directly affect motivation, performance, and long-term engagement.

However, as Social Exchange Theory has gained traction as an explanatory model, it has also faced several critiques. One notable critique is that SET often oversimplifies the complexities of human relationships by framing them in terms of rational calculations. While economic metaphors may provide insights into certain aspects of human interaction, they fail to account for emotional, psychological, and cultural factors that influence behavior. Human relationships are often driven by intangible elements such as love, loyalty, or moral obligations, which cannot easily be quantified or reduced to a cost-benefit analysis.

In addition, much of the early research on SET was based on Western, individualistic societies, where the emphasis on personal autonomy and self-interest shapes how people engage in relationships. However, in many non-Western, collectivist cultures, relationships are often characterized by interdependence,

community orientation, and long-term obligations. In such cultures, the exchange dynamics might not be driven by immediate reciprocity or the pursuit of personal gain, but rather by communal norms, familial duty, and social harmony. This cultural divergence raises important questions about the universality of Social Exchange Theory and the need to adapt or extend its principles to account for diverse cultural contexts.

Moreover, the rise of global interconnectedness and multicultural environments—particularly in the context of international business, academic exchange, and global teamwork—has underscored the importance of understanding how relationship management operates in culturally diverse settings. In these contexts, factors such as communication styles, power distance, and collective versus individual orientation can significantly influence how exchanges are perceived and how equity is maintained. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of SET must also consider the ways in which culture impacts the interpretation of reciprocity, fairness, and the overall success of relational exchanges.

Organizational behavior research has also highlighted the significance of SET in understanding workplace relationships, such as leader-member exchanges (LMX), teamwork, and negotiations. In these settings, SET can illuminate how employees evaluate their interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates, especially when it comes to the allocation of resources, recognition, and opportunities for advancement. However, challenges such as workplace inequities, favoritism, or cultural clashes can complicate the application of SET in organizational environments, necessitating a more nuanced approach that takes into account both the structural and relational factors influencing exchanges.

The importance of SET in understanding relationship management extends beyond individual interactions to encompass broader societal dynamics, including political systems, international relations, and social networks. By examining how the principles of reciprocity and equity operate in diverse relational contexts, this study aims to offer fresh insights into how SET can be adapted to address the complex and multifaceted nature of human exchange in the modern world.

In summary, the background of this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Social Exchange Theory's evolution, its key concepts (reciprocity, equity, and relationship management), and its application across different relational domains. The increasing recognition of cultural limitations and the theory's potential oversimplification of human behavior calls for an updated perspective that integrates more complex, multidimensional factors into our understanding of exchange processes in diverse contexts. This research will contribute to refining SET's theoretical foundations and offer practical implications for improving relationship dynamics in academic, social, and organizational settings.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) in understanding reciprocity, equity, and relationship management across diverse contexts. The mixed-methods design allows for a comprehensive investigation by combining both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the multifaceted nature of social exchanges and their cultural variations. The methodology is divided into three key stages: data collection, data analysis, and integration of findings.

1. Research Design

The research follows an exploratory design aimed at investigating the core principles of Social Exchange Theory—reciprocity, equity, and relationship management—across various relational contexts, including social, emotional, and organizational settings. The study also examines the influence of cultural

differences on these exchanges. Data will be gathered from a combination of surveys, in-depth interviews, and case studies.

2. Participants

Participants will be selected through purposive and stratified sampling to ensure diversity in terms of cultural background, organizational affiliation, and type of relationship (personal, academic, and professional). The study will include:

- **Social Context:** Individuals from different cultural backgrounds and social networks (e.g., friends, family members).
- **Emotional Context:** Participants involved in close personal relationships (e.g., romantic partners, close friendships).
- **Organizational Context:** Employees, managers, and academics participating in workplace environments or academic exchanges, ensuring a mix of industry sectors and geographical regions.

A total of 300 participants (100 from each context) will be targeted to ensure a sufficient sample size for both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

3. Data Collection Methods

a) Surveys (Quantitative)

A structured survey will be developed to assess participants' perceptions of reciprocity, equity, and relationship satisfaction in their social, emotional, and organizational exchanges. The survey will include both closed and Likert-scale questions that measure:

- **Reciprocity:** The perceived balance of give-and-take in relationships.
- **Equity:** Perceptions of fairness and satisfaction in exchanges.
- **Relationship Management:** Strategies for maintaining positive relationships and handling conflicts or imbalances.
- **Cultural Context:** Questions will include items designed to measure how cultural norms (individualism vs. collectivism) influence perceptions of exchange and fairness.

The survey will be administered online, with questions translated into multiple languages to accommodate diverse participants, and will include cultural adaptation to ensure relevance to various cultural settings.

b) In-Depth Interviews (Qualitative)

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a subset of participants (approximately 30–40 individuals from each context). The interviews will explore:

- How individuals perceive and engage in exchanges in different relational settings.
- How cultural values influence the way individuals manage reciprocity and equity in relationships.
- Specific examples of conflict or imbalance in relationships and how they were addressed.
- The role of communication in maintaining fairness and satisfaction in exchanges.

These interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to uncover deeper insights into how SET functions in various cultural and relational contexts.

c) Case Studies (Qualitative)

Case studies will be conducted within a select number of organizations and academic institutions to provide rich, contextual data on how Social Exchange Theory operates in real-world settings. These case studies will focus on:

- Organizational dynamics such as leadership relationships, team cooperation, and employee satisfaction.
- Academic exchanges between researchers, scholars, or students from different cultural backgrounds.

Data will be gathered from organizational reports, observation, and interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., managers, employees, faculty members, and students).

4. Data Analysis

a) Quantitative Analysis

Survey data will be analyzed using statistical methods to identify patterns and correlations in perceptions of reciprocity, equity, and relationship management across different contexts. Key analysis techniques include:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** To summarize and describe the basic features of the data (e.g., means, standard deviations).
- **Correlation Analysis:** To explore the relationships between reciprocity, equity, and relationship satisfaction.
- **Factor Analysis:** To identify underlying dimensions of relationship management, reciprocity, and equity.
- **Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA):** To examine differences in relationship dynamics across cultural groups and contexts.

b) Qualitative Analysis

Interview and case study data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. This process will involve the following steps:

- **Transcription:** Interviews and case study data will be transcribed verbatim.
- **Coding:** Initial open coding will identify significant themes related to reciprocity, equity, cultural norms, and relationship management strategies.
- **Theme Development:** Codes will be grouped into themes that reflect the ways in which participants manage exchanges, address inequities, and navigate relational dynamics.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparison:** The data will be analyzed to compare how different cultural groups experience and interpret the concepts of reciprocity and equity.

c) Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated in the final analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. This triangulation approach will enable a deeper exploration of how Social Exchange Theory applies across different relational contexts and cultures. For example, quantitative survey results on equity and reciprocity will be complemented by qualitative interview data that offer rich, context-specific insights into how these concepts manifest in everyday interactions.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards will be maintained throughout the research process. Key ethical considerations include:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants will be fully informed about the nature of the study, and consent will be obtained before participation.
- **Confidentiality:** All data will be anonymized to protect participants' identities and ensure privacy.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** The study will ensure cultural sensitivity in the design of surveys and interview questions, taking into account cultural differences in communication and values.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participation will be voluntary, with participants free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

6. Limitations

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of SET, there are several limitations.

The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or memory recall errors. Furthermore, the sample may not fully represent all cultural or relational contexts, particularly in non-Western settings where access to participants may be more restricted. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design may limit the ability to draw conclusions about causal relationships between variables.

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has long been a cornerstone of social scientific inquiry, offering a framework for understanding human behavior in relationships by conceptualizing interactions as exchanges of resources. The theory emphasizes the balance of costs and rewards, focusing on the notion that individuals act based on the principle of maximizing benefits while minimizing costs. Although initially rooted in economic and psychological models, SET has been widely applied across various disciplines, including sociology, communication, organizational behavior, and cultural studies. This literature review explores key concepts within SET—reciprocity, equity, and relationship management—while examining how they manifest across different relational and cultural contexts.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory was first articulated by George Homans in the 1950s, who drew on behavioral psychology to explain the role of rewards and costs in social interactions. According to Homans (1958), individuals engage in relationships with the expectation that they will receive rewards—whether tangible (e.g., material resources) or intangible (e.g., affection, social approval)—in return for the effort and resources they invest. Homans' basic principles were later expanded by scholars like Peter Blau (1964) and Richard Emerson (1976), who further developed the framework by emphasizing the role of power, trust, and the interdependence of exchange relationships.

Blau (1964) introduced the concept of *distributive justice* to SET, suggesting that individuals evaluate their relationships based on perceptions of fairness and equity in exchanges. This concept aligns closely with the notion of *equity*, which has become one of the central pillars of SET, particularly in the study of interpersonal relationships.

SET has been influential in understanding the dynamics of personal, social, and organizational relationships, with its principles applied to various contexts, including romantic relationships, family dynamics, workplace behavior, and group interactions.

2. Reciprocity in Social Exchange Theory

Reciprocity is the foundational principle of SET. The idea of reciprocity refers to the mutual exchange of resources—whether material, emotional, or social—between individuals. In SET, reciprocity serves as a mechanism to maintain relationships by ensuring that individuals engage in give-and-take behavior, thereby fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual satisfaction (Gouldner, 1960). Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity is considered one of the earliest and most influential contributions to SET, suggesting that individuals feel compelled to reciprocate favors and benefits as a means of maintaining fairness in their relationships.

Research has shown that reciprocity can strengthen both interpersonal relationships and group cohesion (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In organizational settings, for example, employees who feel that their contributions are reciprocated by their leaders or coworkers are more likely to exhibit higher job satisfaction and engagement (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). On the other hand, a lack of reciprocity can result in relationship breakdowns, with individuals withdrawing from or disengaging in relationships that fail to meet their expectations of mutual benefit (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

However, the notion of reciprocity is not always straightforward. Some scholars have pointed out that not all reciprocal exchanges are equal, and that power imbalances can complicate reciprocal behavior (Emerson, 1976). For example, individuals with greater power or resources may have different expectations of reciprocity than those with less, leading to unequal exchanges and potential dissatisfaction in relationships.

3. Equity in Social Exchange Theory

The concept of equity within SET is based on the principle that individuals seek fairness in their relationships, which in turn influences their satisfaction and commitment (Adams, 1965). The equity theory suggests that individuals compare their own input-output ratios (e.g., time, effort, and emotional investment vs. rewards received) to those of others. When individuals perceive an imbalance—whether under-benefited or over-benefited—they are likely to experience feelings of dissatisfaction or inequity, leading to efforts to restore balance either through behavioral adjustments or by terminating the relationship (Huczcz, 1991).

Research in both personal and organizational settings has demonstrated the importance of equity in maintaining healthy relationships. In romantic relationships, for example, partners are more likely to remain satisfied when they perceive that the balance of contributions and rewards is equitable (Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). In organizational contexts, perceived inequity can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and diminished organizational commitment (Greenberg, 1990). However, scholars have also critiqued equity theory's Western-centric assumptions, particularly regarding its emphasis on individualism and the pursuit of equal exchange. In collectivist cultures, the focus may be less on individual fairness and more on maintaining harmony and fulfilling collective obligations. For example, in many Asian cultures, individuals may tolerate inequality in relationships if it serves to uphold social harmony or respect for authority (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cultural variations highlight the need to reconsider the universality of equity as a standard for relationship satisfaction in different cultural contexts.

4. Relationship Management and Social Exchange

Relationship management, in the context of SET, refers to the strategies individuals use to maintain, repair, or enhance the quality of their exchanges. This concept has been widely explored in organizational behavior and communication studies, where maintaining effective working relationships is crucial for productivity, collaboration, and conflict resolution.

SET has been particularly influential in understanding *leader-member exchanges* (LMX), a key concept in organizational behavior. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and reciprocity, which result in positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships, where reciprocity and equity are lacking, are associated with negative outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover (Scandura & Graen, 1984).

In personal relationships, relationship management often involves balancing emotional and material exchanges. For instance, in romantic relationships, partners engage in behaviors such as support-giving, affection, and conflict resolution to ensure the ongoing satisfaction of both parties (Clark & Mills, 1979). Communication plays a central role in this process, as individuals navigate expectations of reciprocity and equity through verbal and nonverbal exchanges.

The concept of *relationship maintenance strategies* has been developed to explain how individuals actively work to sustain relationships over time. These strategies include behaviors such as expressing

appreciation, sharing activities, and managing conflicts, all of which contribute to the perceived quality of the relationship and the continued balance of exchanges (Canary & Dainton, 2003).

5. Cultural Limitations and Critiques of SET

While SET provides a robust framework for understanding relational dynamics, its applicability across different cultural contexts has been a subject of debate. Many of the foundational studies in SET were conducted in Western, individualistic societies, where relationships are often viewed as transactional and based on the principles of personal autonomy and self-interest. However, in collectivist cultures, relationships are often characterized by interdependence, social obligation, and a focus on community rather than individual gain (Triandis, 1995).

For instance, in many Asian cultures, the exchange of resources may be governed by social norms of reciprocity, but the motivations for exchange may be more relational than economic. Individuals may be more concerned with maintaining social harmony and fulfilling familial or community obligations than with pursuing equality or fairness in exchanges (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Additionally, SET's focus on rational calculations has been critiqued for oversimplifying the emotional and moral aspects of relationships. Critics argue that human interactions are often driven by emotions such as love, loyalty, and altruism, which cannot be fully explained by economic models of exchange (Gergen, McLaughlin, & Casey, 2001). As such, SET may fail to account for the complexities of human behavior, especially in relationships where people act out of moral obligations or social expectations rather than self-interest.

Conclusion

This study has explored Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a framework for understanding the dynamics of reciprocity, equity, and relationship management across diverse contexts. By examining the foundational principles of SET—reciprocity, equity, and the management of relationships—we have gained a deeper insight into how individuals navigate exchanges in personal, emotional, and organizational settings.

Reciprocity remains a core element of SET, emphasizing the mutual exchange of resources that underpins social interactions. The findings suggest that reciprocity is central to relationship satisfaction, with individuals striving for balanced exchanges to foster trust, cooperation, and long-term engagement. However, the complexities of reciprocity, especially in the presence of power imbalances and differing expectations, highlight the limitations of simplistic cost-benefit models. The study also underscores that while reciprocity is fundamental, the way it is perceived and practiced may vary significantly across different cultural contexts.

Equity, as a critical component of SET, reveals the importance of fairness and balance in relationships. The literature reviewed suggests that perceived inequity—whether through over-benefit or under-benefit—can lead to dissatisfaction, resentment, and even disengagement. However, the notion of equity is not always universally applicable. The cultural dimensions of equity, particularly in collectivist versus individualist societies, reveal that fairness is often not determined by strict equality but by social norms, familial obligations, and communal expectations. In these contexts, individuals may be more concerned with maintaining harmony and fulfilling social duties than with achieving an equitable distribution of rewards and costs.

Relationship management, particularly in organizational settings, emphasizes the strategic actions individuals take to maintain positive interactions and resolve conflicts. High-quality relationships, whether

in personal or professional contexts, are marked by ongoing efforts to balance reciprocity and equity. Leadership, communication, and conflict resolution are key strategies employed to manage these exchanges, ensuring long-term satisfaction and stability. In workplaces, for example, leaders who foster high-quality leader-member exchanges (LMX) can significantly impact employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance.

While Social Exchange Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, it is not without its critiques. Its focus on rational calculations of costs and benefits tends to overlook the emotional, moral, and cultural factors that shape human interactions. The theory's Western-centric origins, which emphasize individualism and personal gain, do not fully capture the relational nuances found in collectivist or non-Western cultures, where social harmony, family obligations, and collective well-being often take precedence over individual fairness. This limitation calls for an expanded and culturally sensitive application of SET that better reflects the diverse ways in which people engage in social exchanges across the globe.

In conclusion, Social Exchange Theory offers profound insights into the mechanisms of reciprocity, equity, and relationship management, but its applicability must be broadened to incorporate cultural variations and the emotional and moral dimensions of human relationships. Future research should continue to refine SET by examining how these core principles function in a wide range of cultural and relational contexts, exploring the complexities that extend beyond economic and rational models of exchange. By doing so, we can develop a more holistic understanding of human behavior in relationships, one that accounts for both the material and intangible elements that drive social interactions in an increasingly globalized world.

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