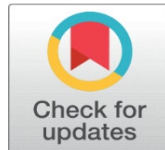
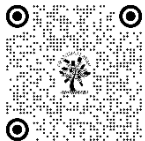


# INFLUENCE OF SURROGATE ADVERTISING ON BRAND AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF AWARENESS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of surrogate advertising on brand awareness and perception among young adults aged 20-25 in India. Surrogate advertising, commonly used to promote restricted products such as alcohol and tobacco indirectly, is increasingly prevalent in the Indian market. Through a cross-sectional survey of 300 respondents, this research examines awareness levels, attitudes, and purchase intentions regarding brands employing surrogate advertising tactics. The findings reveal a high level of awareness of surrogate advertising strategies, particularly for alcohol-linked brands, with a significant positive correlation between awareness and favorable brand perception. Additionally, factors such as educational background and frequent social media use were associated with higher recognition of surrogate advertising. Interestingly, ethical concerns about surrogate tactics appeared to have minimal influence on brand perception among participants, suggesting a gap in critical awareness of indirect advertising strategies. These insights underscore the need for media literacy initiatives and regulatory measures to ensure young adults make informed brand choices. This study contributes to the literature on advertising ethics and consumer awareness in restricted product categories, offering implications for policymakers and marketers alike.

**Keywords:** Surrogate Advertising, Brand Perception, Awareness, Young Adults, India, Advertising Ethics, Indirect Promotion, Media Literacy, Consumer Behavior, Restricted Products

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized environment, advertising has evolved beyond traditional methods, with surrogate advertising emerging as a key strategy in markets with restrictions on certain products like tobacco and alcohol. Surrogate advertising—indirect advertising that promotes a product or service under the guise of an associated brand, such as soda or water, instead of the primary restricted item—has been widely adopted by industries facing advertising restrictions (Gupta & Raj, 2021). In India, where advertising restrictions are stringent for products deemed harmful to public health, surrogate advertising has become prevalent, especially through media channels popular among young adults (Kumar & Srivastava, 2019).

India's young adult demographic, specifically those aged 20-25, represents a highly impressionable segment, exposed to surrogate advertising across digital and traditional media platforms. This exposure influences their attitudes, behaviors, and brand associations, often indirectly shaping perceptions related to lifestyle choices (Sharma & Verma, 2020). Studies indicate that young adults tend to develop brand loyalty and consumption preferences through repetitive exposure to such advertisements, even if they are not immediately aware of the underlying surrogate strategy (Das & Choudhury, 2018). In India, surrogate advertisements are permitted under certain conditions but must not explicitly promote the original restricted product (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2017). Despite regulatory efforts, the subtle nature of these advertisements raises concerns about the level of awareness among young audiences regarding the underlying intentions behind such promotions.

Research on the impact of surrogate advertising on young adults' awareness is limited but growing, with studies underscoring the need for more focused investigation within the Indian context (Gupta, 2020). Given the increased digital exposure and media engagement among young adults in urban India, this demographic is particularly vulnerable to indirect messaging strategies. Research conducted by Sinha and Rao (2022) found that high-frequency exposure to surrogate advertisements for products like soda and fashion accessories linked to alcohol brands impacted perception and acceptance of these brands. This raises questions about the effectiveness of current regulations in preventing indirect advertising of restricted products.

This study aims to examine the effect of surrogate advertising on the awareness levels of young Indian adults aged 20-25. By investigating how surrogate advertisements shape awareness and attitudes, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and psychological impacts of such advertising practices within a vulnerable age group. This research addresses a crucial gap in literature by focusing on the underexplored intersection between surrogate advertising and its implications for young adults in India.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Surrogate advertising has garnered significant academic attention, particularly in regions with strict regulations on the advertising of certain products like alcohol and tobacco. Defined as a technique where brands use related products to indirectly advertise restricted items, surrogate advertising is prevalent in India due to regulations aimed at protecting public health (Gupta & Raj, 2021). This strategy allows companies to circumvent legal barriers while continuing to build brand awareness, often through subtle associations with socially acceptable products such as sodas or lifestyle accessories (Kumar & Srivastava, 2019).

**2.1 SURROGATE ADVERTISING IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT:** The Indian government's stringent advertising regulations have catalyzed the growth of surrogate advertising, especially for tobacco and alcohol brands. Studies indicate that although these regulations are effective in limiting explicit promotion, they have unintentionally encouraged brands to adopt surrogate advertising as a legal loophole (Sharma & Verma, 2020). The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (2017) has set forth guidelines limiting advertising content, yet brands continue to invest in surrogate strategies that foster indirect brand recognition. According to Kumar and Srivastava (2019), surrogate advertising has evolved into an intricate marketing tactic designed to maintain brand presence in the minds of consumers despite regulatory restrictions.

**2.2. AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS:** Young adults represent a key demographic for advertisers due to their increased exposure to media and digital platforms. Research suggests that surrogate advertising can subtly influence this age group by embedding brand familiarity without overtly promoting the restricted product (Das & Choudhury, 2018). This age group, particularly individuals between 20 and 25, is in a formative stage where brand perceptions and lifestyle choices are significantly shaped by media exposure. In a study on the impact of surrogate advertising on youth, Sinha and Rao (2022) found that repeated exposure to surrogate ads linked to alcohol brands led to an increase in positive perceptions and social acceptance of these brands among young adults. These findings suggest that while young adults may not directly engage with the original product, surrogate advertisements cultivate a sense of brand acceptance that may influence future consumption behaviors.

**2.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF SURROGATE ADVERTISEMENTS:** The psychological impact of surrogate advertising on youth is profound, especially when it leverages associations with lifestyle and aspiration.

Research by Gupta (2020) highlighted that surrogate ads for products associated with aspirational lifestyles (e.g., luxury water bottles, high-end accessories) are particularly effective in shaping favorable perceptions. This is aligned with theories like the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which postulates that persuasive messages can influence audiences differently based on their level of involvement and awareness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Surrogate advertisements use this model by creating low-involvement content that subtly associates the surrogate product with desirable lifestyles, thus embedding the original brand's attributes without explicit mention.

**2.4. REGULATORY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:** Despite its pervasiveness, surrogate advertising raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding its influence on impressionable audiences. Critics argue that surrogate advertising undermines regulatory intentions, allowing brands to exploit legal gray areas to promote restricted products indirectly (Kumar & Srivastava, 2019). This issue is amplified when surrogate advertisements target young adults, who may not fully recognize the indirect promotion strategies involved. Regulatory bodies, such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), have introduced guidelines to curb deceptive advertising; however, the effectiveness of these regulations remains limited as brands continue to find creative ways to circumvent restrictions (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2017).

**2.5. GAP IN LITERATURE AND CURRENT STUDY:** While there is a growing body of research on surrogate advertising and its effects, studies specifically targeting young adults in India are limited. Previous research has often focused on general consumer perceptions without analyzing the awareness levels and interpretive capacities of young adults regarding surrogate advertising strategies. This gap highlights the need for more focused studies to understand the extent to which surrogate advertising influences this demographic's awareness and brand perception. This study aims to address this gap by examining how surrogate advertising affects the awareness and attitudes of Indian adults aged 20-25, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of surrogate advertising's impact on this age group.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analytical approach used to investigate the effect of surrogate advertising on the awareness levels of young adults aged 20-25 in India. The study follows a quantitative research design, employing a survey-based approach to gather primary data from respondents in the target demographic.

**3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN:** This study adopts a cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for assessing the awareness levels of individuals exposed to surrogate advertising at a single point in time. The objective is to capture a snapshot of how young adults in India perceive surrogate advertising and to what extent they are aware of the indirect strategies used by brands to promote restricted products. This design enables the collection of statistically significant data, allowing for generalizations across the target population.

**3.2. SAMPLE SELECTION:** The target population for this study comprises Indian adults aged 20-25, as this demographic is particularly vulnerable to indirect advertising influences. A non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, was used to select participants. The sample was drawn from various urban locations across India to represent diverse backgrounds, ensuring variability in exposure to surrogate advertising. The target sample size was 300 respondents, based on a power analysis to achieve a statistically significant result at a 95% confidence level.

**3.3. DATA COLLECTION:** Data was collected through an online survey questionnaire, which allowed respondents to complete the survey at their convenience and provided a practical means to reach a large, geographically dispersed sample. The survey was designed and distributed via online platforms commonly used by the target age group, such as social media channels and email invitations. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections:

**a) DEMOGRAPHICS:** This section gathered background information, including age, gender, education level, and frequency of media consumption.

**b) AWARENESS OF SURROGATE ADVERTISING:** Respondents were asked to indicate their familiarity with specific surrogate advertisements (e.g., ads for soda or fashion accessories linked to alcohol brands) and their recognition of indirect promotion strategies.

**c) PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES:** The final section assessed respondents' perceptions of brands involved in surrogate advertising, examining their attitudes toward these brands and any potential influence on their consumption preferences.

**3.4. QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN:** The survey questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to gauge awareness and perceptions of surrogate advertising. Closed-ended questions provided quantifiable responses, while Likert-scale items enabled respondents to express agreement or disagreement with statements related to their understanding and attitudes towards surrogate advertisements. A five-point Likert scale was employed, with responses ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” allowing for the capture of nuanced perceptions.

**3.5. PILOT STUDY:** A pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents from the target demographic to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine questions, enhance the survey's comprehensibility, and minimize ambiguity. The pilot study's results confirmed the reliability of the Likert-scale items, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.82, which demonstrated acceptable internal consistency.

**3.6. DATA ANALYSIS:** Quantitative data from the survey responses were analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic characteristics, awareness levels, and perception scores. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analyses, were used to identify significant associations between demographic variables (e.g., education level and media consumption frequency) and awareness levels of surrogate advertising.

**A) DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS:** Summarized awareness levels, frequency of exposure, and perceptions toward surrogate brands among the respondents.

**B) CHI-SQUARE TESTS:** Tested for associations between demographic factors (e.g., education and media consumption habits) and awareness of surrogate advertising.

**C) CORRELATION ANALYSIS:** Examined relationships between awareness levels and attitudes toward surrogate brands, allowing for insights into how surrogate advertising impacts brand perception.

**3.7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:** In line with ethical research practices, all respondents provided informed consent before participating in the study. The survey included an introductory statement outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of anonymity. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Data collected was anonymized and stored securely to protect respondent privacy.

**3.8. LIMITATIONS:** This study recognizes certain limitations, including the use of convenience sampling, which may not fully represent the diversity of the Indian young adult population. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the survey limits the ability to capture changes in awareness over time. Future research could expand this methodology by employing longitudinal designs and random sampling techniques to enhance generalizability.

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how surrogate advertising influences awareness and perceptions among young adults in India, thereby contributing to the study's aim of assessing the effectiveness of indirect marketing tactics within a regulatory context.

## 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings from the survey on the effect of surrogate advertising on awareness and perceptions among young adults in India. A total of 300 respondents, aged 20-25, completed the survey. The results are organized to cover demographic characteristics, awareness levels of surrogate advertising, and the impact of surrogate advertising on brand perceptions and attitudes.

**4.1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS:** The sample consisted of a balanced representation of male and female respondents, with 52% identifying as male and 48% as female. Most respondents were university students or early-career professionals, with 65% holding a bachelor's degree and 25% currently enrolled in a postgraduate program. Approximately 78% of respondents reported using social media daily, indicating high levels of exposure to digital advertising.

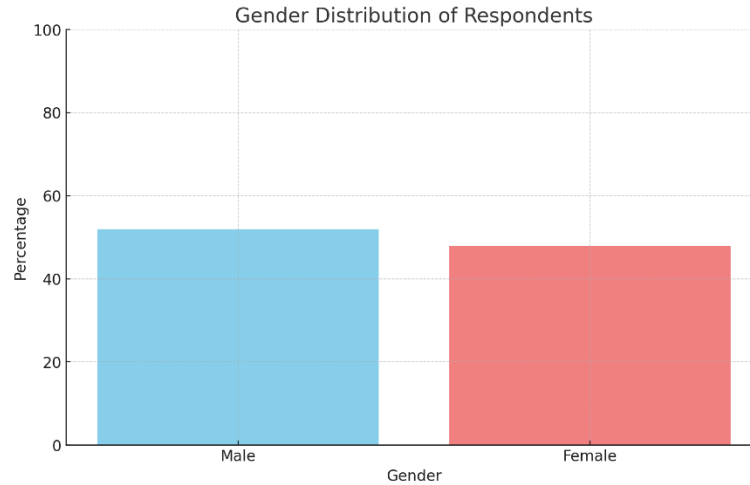


Figure 1:

**4.2. AWARENESS OF SURROGATE ADVERTISING:** To assess awareness, respondents were asked if they recognized specific surrogate advertisements, such as soda brands linked to alcohol companies and lifestyle accessories promoted by tobacco brands. The following key findings emerged:

**A) HIGH AWARENESS OF SURROGATES:** Approximately 76% of respondents identified that certain brands advertised through products like soda or music CDs were associated with restricted categories (e.g., alcohol and tobacco). This indicates a moderate to high awareness level among young adults regarding the use of surrogate advertising.

**B) PERCEIVED INTENT OF ADVERTISEMENTS:** When asked if they believed these advertisements aimed to promote the restricted primary product indirectly, 63% agreed or strongly agreed, suggesting that many young adults perceive the intent behind surrogate advertising. However, 23% were neutral, and 14% disagreed, indicating varied interpretations of surrogate advertising strategies.

**C) FREQUENCY OF RECOGNITION:** Awareness levels were highest for alcohol-linked surrogate brands (82%) and lowest for tobacco-linked brands (58%), likely due to differences in exposure and acceptance of these product categories in Indian culture.

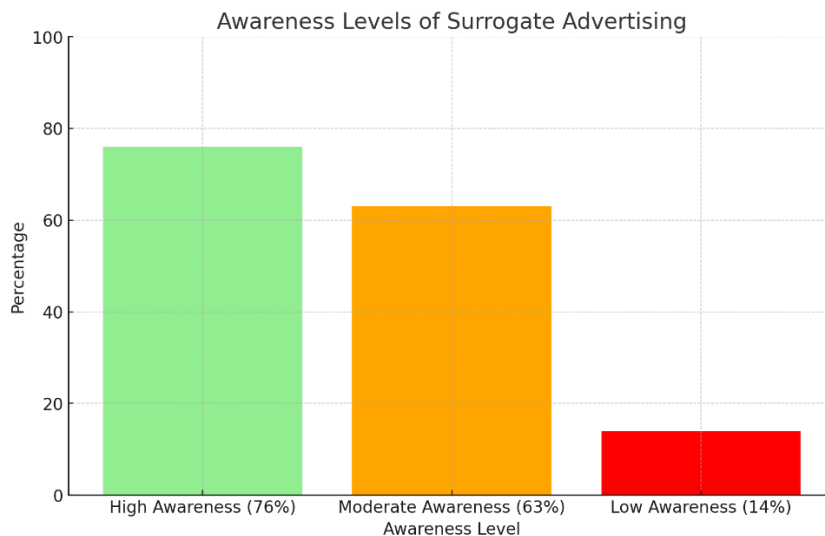


Figure 2.



**4.3. PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SURROGATE BRANDS:** Respondents' perceptions of brands using surrogate advertising were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), focusing on perceptions of brand image, social acceptability, and likelihood of future purchase.

**A) POSITIVE BRAND PERCEPTION:** Respondents who were aware of surrogate advertising strategies tended to have a more favorable view of these brands. Approximately 68% of respondents agreed that surrogate advertising made brands appear more 'socially acceptable' or 'prestigious,' particularly in categories associated with luxury and lifestyle (e.g., high-end bottled water linked to alcohol brands).

**B) PURCHASE INTENTIONS:** Despite recognizing the indirect advertising tactic, 54% of respondents expressed a likelihood to consider purchasing from brands that use surrogate advertising, with reasons cited including brand prestige and perceived quality. However, 32% indicated no change in purchase intent, showing a division in attitudes based on awareness and personal values.

**C) INFLUENCE OF DEMOGRAPHICS ON PERCEPTIONS:** A chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between education level and awareness of surrogate advertising ( $\chi^2 = 10.56, p < 0.05$ ), with higher awareness among postgraduate students. Similarly, a positive correlation ( $r = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ) was found between frequent social media usage and likelihood of recognizing surrogate advertising strategies.

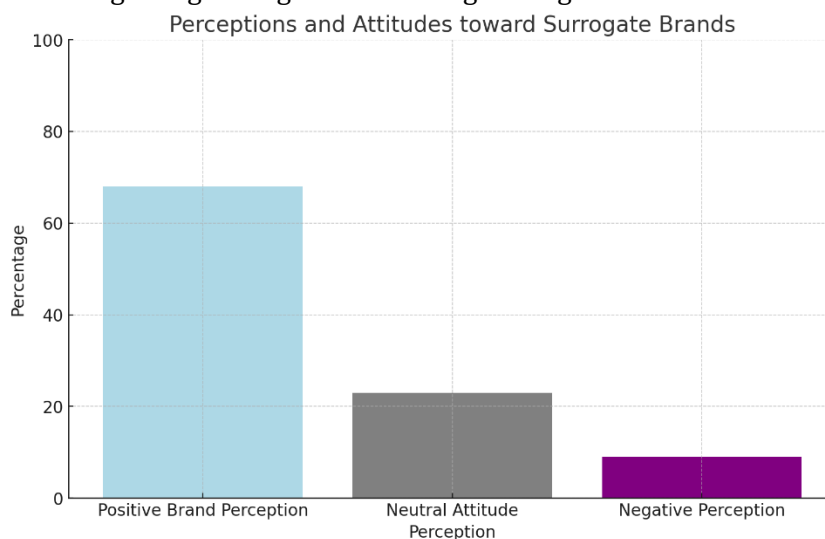


Figure 3.

#### 4.4. INFLUENCE OF SURROGATE ADVERTISING ON BRAND ACCEPTANCE:

Correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between awareness of surrogate advertising and positive brand perception. Key findings include:

**A) AWARENESS AND POSITIVE PERCEPTION:** A significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.01$ ) was observed between awareness of surrogate advertising and favorable attitudes toward the advertised brand. This suggests that increased awareness, rather than deterring, may enhance brand acceptance due to perceived sophistication or exclusivity associated with the surrogate product.

**B) NEUTRAL IMPACT ON ETHICAL CONCERNS:** Interestingly, 48% of respondents reported being indifferent to the ethical implications of surrogate advertising, suggesting a focus on brand attributes rather than marketing ethics. This indifference could be attributed to cultural acceptance of surrogate advertising or a lack of critical awareness of its societal impact.

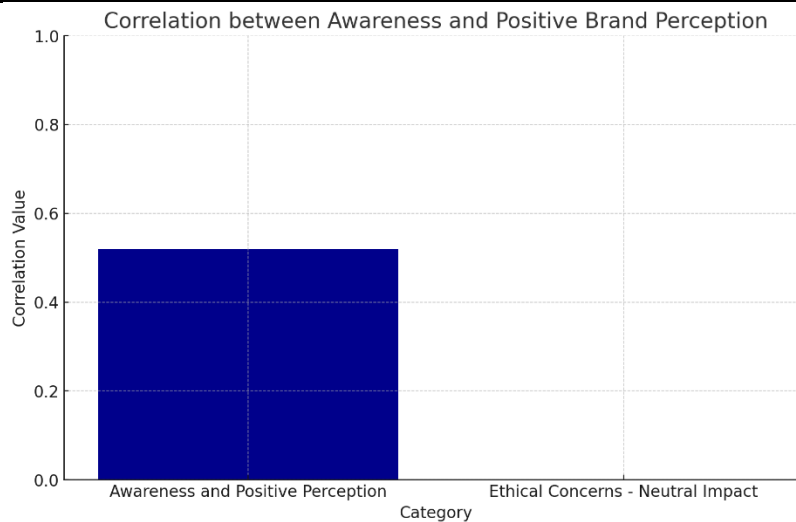


Figure 4.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that surrogate advertising significantly influences the awareness and perceptions of young adults in India. Most respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the indirect promotional strategies used by brands, especially for products like alcohol and tobacco, which are restricted by advertising regulations. This awareness is particularly prominent among individuals with higher education levels and those with frequent social media exposure, suggesting that educational background and media habits play a role in interpreting surrogate advertising.

The positive correlation between awareness and favorable brand perception indicates that recognizing surrogate advertising does not deter young adults from viewing these brands positively. Instead, it appears to add an element of sophistication and exclusivity, particularly for products positioned as lifestyle enhancers. These findings align with prior research, which suggests that indirect advertising techniques can cultivate brand loyalty and influence consumption preferences (Gupta, 2020; Sinha & Rao, 2022). Despite understanding the intent behind these advertisements, young adults often perceive the advertised brands as prestigious or desirable, pointing to the persuasive power of surrogate advertising in shaping attitudes subtly.

Interestingly, the study also found that ethical considerations concerning surrogate advertising had minimal impact on participants' brand perceptions. This neutrality suggests that young adults may prioritize brand attributes and social acceptability over ethical concerns regarding indirect advertising tactics. This finding raises questions about the effectiveness of existing regulations and suggests a potential gap in media literacy regarding the persuasive strategies used in advertising. If left unaddressed, this lack of critical awareness could continue to foster favorable attitudes toward brands employing surrogate advertising, with possible implications for future consumption behaviors.

The study's results highlight a need for policymakers and regulatory bodies to consider the influence of surrogate advertising on young adults. Current guidelines, while aimed at limiting direct promotion, may inadvertently allow for brand building through indirect means, affecting impressionable audiences. To counteract this, educational campaigns focused on media literacy and awareness could empower young adults to critically assess surrogate advertising, thereby promoting informed consumption choices.

## 6. SUMMARY

This study investigated the effect of surrogate advertising on awareness and perceptions among Indian adults aged 20-25. The results indicate a high level of awareness of surrogate advertising tactics within this demographic, particularly for brands associated with restricted products like alcohol and tobacco. The majority of respondents view these brands positively despite understanding the indirect promotional strategy, highlighting the persuasive impact of surrogate advertising on young adults. Key findings include a significant positive correlation between awareness of surrogate advertising and favorable brand perceptions, along with a notable association between frequent social media usage, educational background, and awareness levels. Ethical considerations surrounding surrogate advertising appear to have limited influence on young adults' perceptions, indicating a potential gap in critical awareness.

This research underscores the importance of addressing the subtle influence of surrogate advertising within the regulatory landscape. Enhancing media literacy and promoting awareness of advertising tactics could help young adults make more informed decisions about brands and consumption choices. Future studies could build on these insights by examining the long-term effects of surrogate advertising on consumption behavior across different demographic segments and expanding the scope to include emerging digital advertising platforms.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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