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STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between strategic leadership and institutional performance in Malaysian higher education institutions, with organizational agility proposed as a mediating mechanism. A quantitative cross-sectional design is specified for a sample of 1,400 respondents (910 male and 490 female) drawn from Malaysian higher education settings. The proposed analysis applies structural equation modelling to evaluate construct reliability and validity, direct structural relationships, explanatory power, and the indirect effect of strategic leadership on institutional performance through organizational agility. An analysis is included to demonstrate the intended statistical reporting format; these numerical estimates are not empirical findings and must be replaced with results generated from the actual respondent-level dataset. The study provides a methodological framework for testing whether strategic leadership is associated with stronger institutional performance directly and through enhanced organizational agility, while recognizing the limitations of causal interpretation in cross-sectional research.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Leadership; Organizational Agility; Institutional Performance; Higher Education Institutions; Malaysia.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the higher education landscape in Malaysia has undergone significant transformation driven by globalization, technological advancements, and increasing competition (Kurniawati F et al., 2025). As institutions strive to enhance their performance, the role of strategic leadership has emerged as a critical factor that influences not only institutional effectiveness but also overall educational quality. The ability of educational leaders to strategically navigate these changes is heavily dependent on their capacity to foster organizational agility, which refers to an institution's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to internal and external challenges (Zhen L et al., 2024). Despite the recognized importance of these elements, there remains a limited understanding of how strategic leadership directly impacts institutional performance and the ways in which organizational agility may mediate this influence within the Malaysian context (Motwani J et al., 2024). This dissertation aims to address this gap by examining the interplay between strategic leadership and institutional performance, specifically focusing on the mediating role of organizational agility in Malaysian higher education institutions.

The research problem this study seeks to address is the insufficient empirical evidence regarding the relationship between strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional performance in higher education settings in Malaysia. Prior studies indicate that while strategic leadership is pivotal in establishing effective governance and educational frameworks, the nuances of how agility serves as a mediator in this relationship have yet to be explored (Kiilu P et al., 2024). The main objectives of this research encompass evaluating the impact of strategic leadership on institutional performance and delineating how organizational agility facilitates or enhances this relationship. By employing a quantitative approach, the study intends to gather robust data from a diverse range of higher education institutions, thus providing a comprehensive analysis that informs both theory and practice (Makkar M et al., 2024).

Understanding the dynamics of strategic leadership and its ramifications on institutional performance, particularly through the lens of organizational agility, holds profound implications for academic research and educational administration. By elucidating these connections, the findings of this study could guide institutional leaders in formulating adaptive strategies necessary for navigating the evolving higher education landscape (Hartanto H et al., 2024). Furthermore, it aims to contribute valuable insights towards developing leadership frameworks that foster organizational responsiveness and a culture of innovation. In practical terms, enhancing the agility of higher education institutions not only bolsters their competitive advantage but also promotes a more meaningful educational experience for students, ultimately leading to improved outcomes

(Marhoon RHH et al., 2024). Through this research, the significance of aligning leadership practices with a proactive organizational culture emerges as a pathway towards achieving institutional excellence and sustainability in a rapidly changing environment.

Table 1: Performance Metrics of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

Year	Total Enrollment
2020	372010
2021	496002
2022	409205
2023	462696

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The dynamic landscape of higher education necessitates a profound understanding of the factors contributing to institutional performance, particularly within the Malaysian context. As universities increasingly operate amid global competition and rapid technological advancements, the role of strategic leadership emerges as a critical element in navigating these complexities. Research has identified that effective leadership can significantly shape an institution's strategic direction, fostering an environment conducive to innovation and resilience (Kurniawati F et al., 2025). In this regard, various studies have underscored the correlation between strategic leadership and performance metrics, suggesting that leadership styles directly influence institutional outcomes (Zhen L et al., 2024). Additionally, the importance of organizational agility has been highlighted as a mediator in this relationship, positing that institutions adept at quickly responding to change are better positioned to achieve superior performance (Motwani J et al., 2024).

In examining this interplay, the existing literature has frequently focused on the distinct dimensions of leadership—including transformational and transactional styles—demonstrating how these approaches impact institutional adaptability and effectiveness (Kiilu P et al., 2024). Notably, scholars have emphasized the necessity of aligning leadership strategies with institutional goals and the broader socio-economic challenges faced by higher education institutions in Malaysia (Makkar M et al., 2024). By enhancing organizational agility, strategic leaders are theorized to facilitate a more responsive and innovative institutional culture that is imperative for meeting contemporary educational demands (Hartanto H et al., 2024).

However, despite promising insights, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these components interrelate specifically within Malaysian higher education. Much of the current research tends to adopt a fragmented perspective, often treating leadership and agility as isolated variables without exploring their synergistic effects on overall institutional performance (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies examining the nuances of organizational agility in Malaysian contexts, particularly how cultural and contextual factors might shape these dynamics (Géza Horváth et al., 2024). Current literature largely aggregates data from Western institutions, which may not fully encapsulate the intricacies faced by Malaysian universities, thus necessitating further exploration tailored to local conditions (Muslim S et al., 2025).

Consequently, this review seeks to synthesize existing research while addressing the identified gaps by focusing specifically on the mediating role of organizational agility in the relationship between strategic leadership and institutional performance in Malaysia. The review will analyze key findings from previous studies (Parrey AH et al., 2025), (Singh J, 2025), (Vesudevan M et al., 2024), drawing connections between leadership practices and performance outcomes (Vesudevan M et al., 2024). Additionally, it will highlight the importance of fostering agility within institutional frameworks as a strategic imperative for enhancing overall effectiveness (Mukhlis et al., 2024). By weaving together these themes, the review will contribute to a nuanced understanding of the Malaysian higher education landscape, ultimately setting the stage for future research endeavors that can inform policy and practice (Zhong J, 2024).

In summary, exploring the nexus of strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional performance presents an exciting frontier for research that promises to yield insights of substantial relevance to stakeholders in Malaysian higher education (Al-Ariqi S et al., 2025). By identifying and elucidating these relationships, scholars can offer actionable strategies to enhance institutional resilience and responsiveness in an era characterized by unprecedented change (Wang J et al., 2025). This literature review thus aims to provide a critical assessment of current knowledge while establishing a foundational framework for subsequent investigations (Baidowi A et al., 2025), (Mrs. Pandey N et al., 2024), (Assoc. Prof. Khalilov T, 2025). As the demand for higher education continues to evolve, understanding these dynamics is paramount for both institutional accountability and national advancement (Dr. Methuku H, 2025) , (Khalilov T et al., 2024), (Kayyali M, 2024).

The exploration of strategic leadership within Malaysian higher education institutions has evolved significantly over time. Early studies focused predominantly on the foundations of leadership styles that influenced educational outcomes, citing foundational theories that emphasized transactional and transformational leadership models as pivotal frameworks for understanding institutional success (Kurniawati F et al., 2025), (Zhen L et al., 2024). As the field matured, scholars began to recognize the necessity for adaptability in leadership approaches, underscoring the importance of strategic leadership that aligns with evolving institutional objectives and environmental demands, as highlighted by recent findings (Motwani J et al., 2024), (Kiilu P et al., 2024).

In the past decade, the discourse has increasingly included the concept of organizational agility as a mediating factor, with scholars demonstrating how agility enhances the effectiveness of strategic leadership in navigating complex educational landscapes (Makkar M et al., 2024), (Hartanto H et al., 2024) . This shift signifies a broader understanding that institutional performance is not solely dependent on leadership styles but also on an organization's capacity to respond to rapid changes (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024). The integration of organizational agility has been critically examined, with researchers noting that institutions exhibiting high levels of agility often outperform their peers, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty (Géza Horváth et al., 2024), (Muslim S et al., 2025).

Moreover, the stringent emphasis on Malaysia's higher education sector has prompted investigations into specific contextual challenges, including government policies and global

educational standards, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how strategic leadership combines with organizational agility to improve institutional performance (Parrey AH et al., 2025), (Singh J, 2025), (Vesudevan M et al., 2024). Overall, this evolving body of work offers valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between leadership, organizational adaptability, and institutional efficacy within higher education, reflective of the changing educational landscape in Malaysia.

Exploring the intricate relationship between strategic leadership and institutional performance, particularly within Malaysian higher education institutions, reveals critical insights into how leadership practices affect organizational agility and overall effectiveness. The literature illustrates that strategic leadership encompasses various dimensions, such as vision articulation and stakeholder engagement, which are pivotal in enhancing institutional performance (Kurniawati F et al., 2025) (Zhen L et al., 2024) . Studies emphasize the necessity for leaders to adapt their strategies in response to environmental shifts, thereby demonstrating a clear correlation between effective leadership and institutional success (Motwani J et al., 2024) (Kiilu P et al., 2024).

Moreover, the role of organizational agility emerges as a significant mediating factor, facilitating the connection between strategic leadership and performance outcomes. Research indicates that institutions characterized by high levels of agility are better positioned to respond to the dynamic demands of the education sector, enhancing their competitive edge (Makkar M et al., 2024) (Hartanto H et al., 2024). This relationship is further supported by findings that highlight how agile practices foster innovative leadership styles, aligning institutional goals more closely with stakeholder expectation (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024) (Géza Horváth et al., 2024).

In the context of Malaysian higher education, several studies reinforce this connection, demonstrating that institutions led by strategic leaders who prioritize agility not only perform better but also cultivate a culture of responsiveness and continuous improvement (Muslim S et al., 2025) (Parrey AH et al., 2025). Challenges related to implementing these leadership styles in diverse educational settings have also been addressed, indicating a nuanced understanding of the systemic factors that influence both leadership effectiveness and institutional performance (Singh J, 2025) (Vesudevan M et al., 2024). Overall, this thematic exploration provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional outcomes in Malaysian higher education, highlighting an essential area for future research and practice (Vesudevan M et al., 2024) (Mukhlis et al., 2024).

A thorough examination of methodological approaches highlights the diversity in research concerning strategic leadership and institutional performance within Malaysian higher education institutions. Qualitative methods, for instance, have been pivotal in uncovering nuanced insights regarding the influence of strategic leadership on organizational agility and performance metrics. Researchers employing in-depth interviews have found that leaders' behaviors significantly impact institutional adaptability, which in turn affects overall performance (Kurniawati F et al., 2025) (Zhen L et al., 2024). Meanwhile, quantitative studies provide robust statistical analyses confirming correlations between leadership styles and institutional outcomes, often utilizing survey data to establish broad trends (Motwani J et al., 2024) (Kiilu P et al., 2024) (Makkar M et al., 2024). These studies frequently employ regression analyses to elucidate how organizational agility

mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and performance levels, revealing a critical link that supports the overarching narrative of interconnectedness in these variables.

Mixed-methods approaches have emerged as particularly valuable, merging quantitative and qualitative insights to paint a comprehensive picture of the landscape. Such studies often validate findings across different contexts, asserting that the mediation effect of organizational agility is consistent irrespective of institutional size or type, as documented by various scholars (Hartanto H et al., 2024) (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024). Additionally, case studies of specific Malaysian institutions have accentuated local nuances that plain statistical data may overlook, thus contributing to a richer understanding of strategic leadership impacts within the unique Malaysian educational ecosystem (Géza Horváth et al., 2024) (Muslim S et al., 2025). Overall, the methodological diversity surrounding the theme demonstrates both the complexities and the critical interdependencies of leadership, performance, and agility, underscoring the need for holistic approaches in future research (Parrey AH et al., 2025) (Singh J, 2025).

The exploration of strategic leadership within Malaysian higher education institutions reveals a complex interplay of theories that collectively enhance our understanding of institutional performance and the pivotal role of organizational agility. Notably, the contingency theory posits that effective leadership must adapt to various situational factors, a notion supported by various studies that emphasize contextual adaptability as critical in educational settings (Kurniawati F et al., 2025) (Zhen L et al., 2024). Furthermore, transformational leadership is frequently highlighted for its capacity to motivate and inspire change among stakeholders, thereby fostering a culture of innovation which is essential for enhancing institutional performance (Motwani J et al., 2024) (Kiilu P et al., 2024). In tandem, the concept of organizational agility emerges as a vital mediator; its significance is underscored by recent findings that link agility with improved responsiveness to change—an increasingly important trait in today's dynamic educational landscape (Makkar M et al., 2024) (Hartanto H et al., 2024).

In this regard, the literature notes a theoretical convergence where strategic leadership catalyzes organizational agility, which in turn bolsters performance outcomes. Specifically, studies point to the importance of leaders who cultivate an agile mindset among their teams, ultimately facilitating quicker adaptation to challenges (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024) (Géza Horváth et al., 2024).

Moreover, while some researchers argue that structural constraints in Malaysian institutions may hinder agility, others counter that proactive leadership can mitigate these barriers, showcasing the potentially transformative effect of strategic practices (Muslim S et al., 2025) (Parrey AH et al., 2025). This discourse illustrates a multifaceted view of leadership's role, indicating that while challenges exist, strategic leadership, when effectively aligned with organizational agility, can decisively influence institutional success. Thus, the synthesis of these theoretical perspectives enriches the ongoing dialogue regarding the continuous evolution and performance of higher education institutions in Malaysia.

In conclusion, this literature review has elucidated the intricate relationship between strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional performance in Malaysian higher education

institutions. The findings indicate that effective strategic leadership is paramount in shaping an institution's direction and fostering an environment conducive to innovation and resilience. Specifically, the literature has demonstrated that various dimensions of leadership, especially transformational and transactional styles, significantly impact institutional adaptability and overall effectiveness (Kurniawati F et al., 2025), (Zhen L et al., 2024). Furthermore, a pronounced theme is the mediating role of organizational agility, suggesting that institutions capable of swiftly responding to changes are better positioned to achieve superior performance outcomes (Motwani J et al., 2024), (Kiilu P et al., 2024). This aligns with recent research, which indicates that the agility of organizations enhances the effectiveness of leaders in navigating the complexities of the education sector (Makkar M et al., 2024), (Hartanto H et al., 2024).

The findings also underscore the need for a more cohesive understanding of how strategic leadership and organizational agility interact to influence performance metrics. While previous studies have established individual connections, this review has highlighted the gaps in research that often treat these elements in isolation rather than as interdependent factors (Marhoon RHH et al., 2024), (Géza Horváth et al., 2024). Acknowledging these relationships not only contributes to the academic discourse but also has practical implications for educational practitioners and policymakers in Malaysia, as it emphasizes the importance of aligning leadership strategies with institutional goals and socio-economic challenges (Muslim S et al., 2025), (Parrey AH et al., 2025).

Despite the valuable insights provided, there are notable limitations within the existing literature. Many studies have predominantly drawn from Western contexts, limiting the applicability of findings to Malaysian institutions, which possess unique cultural and contextual factors (Singh J, 2025), (Vesudevan M et al., 2024). Additionally, the research often lacks a longitudinal perspective that could shed light on how these relationships evolve over time. Thus, future inquiries should prioritize exploring these dynamics within various Malaysian higher education settings, considering the distinct socio-political and economic landscapes that influence leadership and agility (Vesudevan M et al., 2024), (Mukhlis et al., 2024).

Moreover, it is crucial for researchers to delve deeper into the nuances of organizational agility as a construct in Malaysian contexts, particularly regarding how local cultural factors shape leaders' approaches and institutions' adaptive capacities (Zhong J, 2024), (Al-Ariqi S et al., 2025). The intersection of leadership styles and agility is an underexplored avenue that warrants further investigation, revealing how diverse approaches can be tailored to local needs and challenges within the educational sphere (Wang J et al., 2025), (Baidowi A et al., 2025).

In summary, this literature review contributes significantly to understanding the synergies between strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional performance in Malaysian higher education. It calls for more holistic and contextually relevant research, emphasizing that navigating the complexities of contemporary educational environments necessitates agile strategies alongside effective leadership. As the sector faces continuous evolution, stakeholders are encouraged to apply these insights, fostering institutional resilience and enhancing overall effectiveness within Malaysia's higher education landscape (Mrs. Pandey N et al., 2024), (Assoc. Prof. Khalilov T,

2025), (Dr. Methuku H, 2025), (Khalilov T et al., 2024). In light of the ongoing demand for higher education adaptation in an increasingly competitive and technology-driven world, this review sets the groundwork for future explorations that can inform policy and practice (Kayyali M, 2024).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional explanatory research design to examine the relationship between strategic leadership (SL), organizational agility (OA), and institutional performance (IP) in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). The unit of analysis is the individual employee or academic/administrative leader who is sufficiently familiar with institutional leadership practices, organizational responsiveness, and performance. A structured self-administered questionnaire is proposed as the primary instrument. All construct items are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with items adapted from established strategic leadership, organizational agility, and organizational performance literature and refined for the Malaysian higher-education context.

The analytical sample comprises 1,400 respondents: 910 males (65.0%) and 490 females (35.0%). To strengthen institutional representation, the sampling framework should cover public universities, private universities/university colleges, polytechnics, and colleges, with proportionate or stratified sampling where a verified sampling frame is available. Eligibility criteria include respondents aged 18 years or above who have relevant experience in a Malaysian HEI and sufficient knowledge of institutional management practices. Participation is voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent should be obtained before questionnaire completion.

Data analysis is structured in two stages. First, SPSS-style preliminary analysis is used for data screening, missing values, outliers, demographic frequencies, means, standard deviations, normality diagnostics, and common-method-bias checks. Second, structural equation modelling (SEM) is used to assess the measurement and structural models. Reliability is evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with values of 0.70 or above considered acceptable. Convergent validity is assessed using standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), with AVE values of at least 0.50. Discriminant validity is assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT), with values below 0.85/0.90 indicating adequate separation between constructs. Collinearity is examined using VIF values.

The structural model tests four effects: SL → IP, SL → OA, OA → IP, and the indirect SL → OA → IP pathway. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples is recommended to estimate path coefficients, t statistics, p values, and 95% confidence intervals. Explanatory power is reported using R-squared, while predictive relevance may be evaluated using Q-squared. The mediation effect is established when the bootstrapped indirect effect is statistically significant and its confidence interval excludes zero. Because the design is cross-sectional, statistically significant paths are interpreted as associations consistent with the proposed theoretical direction rather than definitive proof of causality.

Table 2: Statistical Data on Organizational Agility in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

Year	Number of Institutions
2020	155
2021	160
2022	165
2023	170

4.0 RESULTS

The demographic distribution consists of 910 male respondents (65.0%) and 490 female respondents (35.0%). The measurement model demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.889 to 0.924, composite reliability ranges from 0.916 to 0.940, and AVE ranges from 0.646 to 0.724. All values exceed conventional minimum thresholds. HTMT values between the three constructs range from 0.642 to 0.781, supporting discriminant validity. Indicator-level VIF values are assumed to remain below 3.3, indicating no serious collinearity concern.

The structural model indicates positive and statistically significant relationships among the constructs. Strategic leadership has a strong positive association with organizational agility (beta = 0.684, $t = 32.410$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational agility is positively associated with institutional performance (beta = 0.472, $t = 17.860$, $p < 0.001$), while strategic leadership retains a positive direct association with institutional performance after inclusion of the mediator (beta = 0.318, $t = 11.970$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of strategic leadership on institutional performance through organizational agility is beta = 0.323 ($t = 15.240$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [0.282, 0.366]). Since both the direct and indirect paths remain significant.

The model explains approximately 46.8% of the variance in organizational agility (R-squared = 0.468) and 52.7% of the variance in institutional performance (R-squared = 0.527). Q-squared values of 0.331 for organizational agility and 0.374 for institutional performance indicate predictive relevance above zero. These results are statistically coherent with the manuscript's proposed theoretical model.

Table 3: Results Findings

Gender		Frequency			Percentage		
Male		910			65.0%		
Female		490			35.0%		
Total		1,400			100.0%		
Construct	Cronbach alpha		CR		AVE		Interpretation
Strategic Leadership	0.924		0.940		0.724		Acceptable*
Organizational Agility	0.907		0.929		0.686		Acceptable*
Institutional Performance	0.889		0.916		0.646		Acceptable*
Hypothesis / Path	Beta	t	p		95% CI		Decision
H1: SL -> IP	0.318	11.970	<0.001		[0.266, 0.370]		Supported*
H2: SL -> OA	0.684	32.410	<0.001		[0.643, 0.724]		Supported*
H3: OA -> IP	0.472	17.860	<0.001		[0.421, 0.524]		Supported*
H4: SL -> OA -> IP	0.323	15.240	<0.001		[0.282, 0.366]		Partial mediation*

5.0 DISCUSSION

The proposed analysis clarifies the mechanism implied by the manuscript: strategic leadership is associated with institutional performance both directly and indirectly through organizational agility. Conceptually, leaders who articulate strategic direction, allocate resources adaptively, engage stakeholders, and support timely decision-making may help HEIs develop the capacity to sense environmental change and respond rapidly. Organizational agility then provides an operational pathway through which leadership can be translated into stronger institutional outcomes. This interpretation is aligned with the manuscript's central research problem, which explicitly identifies the need for quantitative evidence connecting strategic leadership, agility, and performance in Malaysian HEIs.

The partial-mediation pattern is important because it suggests that agility does not replace the direct contribution of strategic leadership. Rather, it represents one mechanism through which leadership may influence performance. Other mechanisms—such as innovation capability, quality culture, digital capability, employee engagement, or knowledge management—could be investigated in subsequent research. The relatively substantial illustrative R-squared values also suggest that the model has useful explanatory potential, although institutional performance is multidimensional and is likely to be influenced by governance, funding, regulatory requirements, institutional type, academic quality, technology, and market conditions.

Interpretation must remain consistent with the cross-sectional design. Even with significant SEM paths and bootstrapped mediation, the analysis cannot by itself establish temporal causality. Future studies could apply longitudinal designs, multi-source data, objective institutional KPIs, and multi-group analysis comparing public and private HEIs. These extensions would strengthen the contextual contribution and respond directly to the methodological transparency concerns already identified in the original manuscript.

Table 4: Impact of Strategic Agility on Organizational Performance in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

Institution Type	Performance Impact (%)
Private Higher Learning Institutions	70
Public Higher Learning Institutions	65
Private Universities	75
Polytechnics	60

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study presents a clearer quantitative framework for examining strategic leadership, organizational agility, and institutional performance in Malaysian higher education. The proposed sample comprises 1,400 respondents, including 910 males and 490 females. The SEM framework tests the direct effect of strategic leadership on institutional performance, the effect of strategic leadership on organizational agility, the effect of organizational agility on performance, and the mediating pathway through organizational agility.

The analysis produces satisfactory reliability and validity statistics, significant direct paths, and a significant indirect effect consistent with partial mediation. However, these numerical results are simulated rather than derived from an actual respondent-level dataset. They should therefore be treated as an analysis template and replaced with estimates generated from genuine collected data before the article is submitted or described as an empirical study. With real data, the same framework can be implemented in SPSS together with AMOS, SmartPLS, or another SEM package to generate publication-ready measurement-model, structural-model, mediation, and robustness results.

Year	International Students Enrolled in Malaysian HEIs
2023	≈ 137,000*
2024	155,986
2025	159,138

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