

# STUDY GUIDE



# SIGNIFICANT OTHER

GEFFEN  
**PLAYHOUSE**

# SIGNIFICANT OTHER

WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE  
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE  
**APRIL 3 - MAY 6, 2018**

SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Rachel Weigardt-Egel, Kisha Wilson, Scott Kriloff,  
Ellen Catania, Jessica Brusilow Rollins, Carolyn Marie Wright and Celia Rivera.**

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

**Jennifer Zakkai**

This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.



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SECTION 1

# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

## SIGNIFICANT OTHER



WRITTEN BY

**Joshua Harmon**

DIRECTED BY

**Stephen Brackett**

SCENIC DESIGNER

**Sibyl Wickersheimer**

COSTUME DESIGNER

**Bobby Frederick Tilley**

LIGHTING DESIGNER

**Eric Southern**

SOUND DESIGNER

**Stowe Nelson**

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

**Bree Sherry**

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

**Jessica R. Aguilar**

CASTING DIRECTOR

**Phyllis Schuringa, CSA**



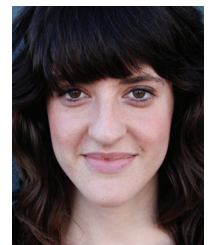
**Melanie Field**  
as Laura



**Vella Lovell**  
as Vanessa



**Preston Martin**  
as Zach/  
Evan/Roger



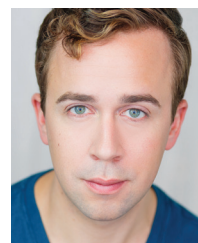
**Keilly McQuail**  
as Kiki



**John Garett Stoker**  
as Will/  
Conrad/Tony



**Concetta Tomei**  
as Helene  
Berman



**Will Von Vogt**  
as Jordan  
Berman

## SYNOPSIS

In this witty and touching comedy, we meet Jordan Berman and his three best friends Laura, Vanessa, and Kiki, all in their late twenties and on the cusp of the next chapter of their lives. As his friends pair off and get married, Jordan is desperate to find a partner. He obsesses about a romance with his co-worker Will, and seeks advice from his friends about how to conduct his love life, which he often ignores. As he juggles being happy for his friends with feeling abandoned by them, he receives wise counsel from his loving grandmother Helene.

**RUNNING TIME** Approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes. There will be one 15 minute intermission.

**PERFORMANCE NOTES** Coarse language is used; there are references to male and female anatomy and sexual activity; a homophobic slur that is the title of a book by gay activist Larry Kramer is used.

**SIGNIFICANT OTHER** (noun) A person who is important to one's well-being; *especially* : a spouse or one in a similar relationship (merriam-webster.com)

## ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



**JOSHUA HARMON** (Playwright)

Joshua Harmon's plays include *Bad Jews* (Roundabout Theatre Company), *Significant Other* (Roundabout Theatre Company; Broadway/Booth Theatre), *Admissions* (Lincoln Center Theater), *Ivanka* (staged readings across the country on Election Eve, 2016) and *Skintight* (upcoming at Roundabout Theatre Company). *Bad Jews* has been one of the most produced plays in the United States of the last few years and has received international productions in Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, South Africa and London's West End, following sold-out runs at Theatre Royal Bath and the St. James. Fellowships include the MacDowell Colony, Atlantic Center for the Arts and NNPN. Joshua is an associate artist at Roundabout Theatre Company and under commission from Manhattan Theatre Club. Education: Juilliard.



**STEPHEN BRACKETT** (Director)

Stephen is a Brooklyn-based director specializing in the development of new plays and musicals. Credits include: Jonathan Tolins' *Buyer & Cellar* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater and Barrow Street Theaters/ National Tour/London's Menier Chocolate Factory), Joe Tracz and Joe Iconis' *Be More Chill* (Two River Theater), *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical* (Theaterworks USA), Kerrigan-Lowdermilk's *The Mad Ones* (Prospect Theater), Tasha Gordon-Solmon's *I Now Pronounce* (Humana Festival), Philip Dawkins' *Le Switch* (About Face Theatre), Caroline McGraw's *Ultimate Beauty Bible* (Page 73), David West Read's *The Great Pretender* (TheatreWorks Silicon Valley), Jacob Yandura and Rebekah Greer Melocik's *Wringer* (New York City Children's Theater), Bixby Elliot's *Sommerfugl* (InViolet), Anton Dudley's *City Of* (Playwrights Realm), Lucas Kavner's *Carnival Kids* (Lesser America), Ken Urban's *The Correspondent* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater), Chad Beckim's *After* (Partial Comfort), Dan Fishback's *The Material World* (Dixon Place), Bekah Brunstetter's *Be A Good Little Widow* (Ars Nova), and *The Tenant* (Woodshed Collective). Upcoming: Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop* (Playwrights Horizons).

## SECTION 2

# THEMES & TOPICS

## THE FAMILY WE CHOOSE

### “THE DREAM”

The painting Jordan and Vanessa view and discuss is *The Dream* by the French post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910). ([henrirousseau.org](http://henrirousseau.org))

### SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/Friend21stCentury](http://tinyurl.com/Friend21stCentury)

[tinyurl.com/G-SBestFriends](http://tinyurl.com/G-SBestFriends)

[tinyurl.com/NYTimesFriendHealth](http://tinyurl.com/NYTimesFriendHealth)

### PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



When we are born, most human beings join a family, which can include one or two parents, siblings, and other relations such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. While many feel close to their families throughout their lives, others run into such profound differences, or dysfunction, that they turn to likeminded friends for understanding and care. In this way, friends are said to be “the family we choose.”

The friends in *Significant Other* are bound together by shared experiences and interests. Jordan and Laura have known each other since college and once lived together; Kiki and Jordan work at the same advertising agency; Vanessa and Jordan often meet at a museum to share responses to a favorite painting and catch up. When at weddings, they make a point of keeping each other company on the dance floor.

Where family members may clash with each other’s personalities or disapprove of their choices in life, good friends can be a source of acceptance and support. In *Significant Other*, the friends are well aware of each other’s quirks and flaws. Acceptance, however, does not mean indulgence. In the following scene, Laura cautions Jordan about his approach to his co-worker Will, whom he wants to date, because she doesn’t want him to get hurt. We also get a humorous glimpse of the sensitivity and self-doubt that seem to plague Jordan.

LAURA

Do not go down this path.

JORDAN

What path?

**OBSESSIVE TENDENCIES**

Jordan is prone to thinking excessively about his feelings for others, how they might view him, and the implications of his and others' actions. This kind of thinking sometimes leads to compulsive, self-defeating behavior. These tendencies can result from an anxiety disorder.

LAURA

You have obsessive tendencies, you know you have obse--

JORDAN

I hate when you say I have obsessive tendencies.

LAURA

But, you do, and I don't like--

JORDAN

No I know I do, but hearing you say I have obsessive tendencies makes me feel like, like I need to go to the vet and be put down.

*Laura shrugs: Maybe that's not a bad idea.*

I hate being a person. I wish I was a rock, you know? Or anything. A salamander. Dental floss. Rain. Whatever happened to Jordan Berman? Oh, he turned into rain.

In *Significant Other*, playwright Joshua Harmon not only captures how the four friends support each other, but also the close friendships that can exist between gay men and straight women. Psychologist Vinita Mehta proposes that straight women find it easier to be friends with men with whom sexual attraction is not an issue. She also notes, "Since they aren't competing for the same men and they aren't attracted to each other, they have the space to develop a deeper level of honesty and trust between them" (*Psychology Today*, 2013).

Studies cited in *The New York Times* have concluded that feeling connected to others is essential to our physical and mental health. Friendships, especially in later years, have been shown to help fend off and manage life-threatening illnesses. Long-term friendships also carry with them shared memories that can make life feel rich and provide comfort, as friends undergo the inevitable losses of older age.

Like all relationships, friendships suffer strains and may not endure. People grow apart because interests and life choices, such as those involving college or career, pull them in different directions; they may be unable to navigate major conflicts; or they become more selective about how to invest their time and energy, especially, as Jordan discovers, when they become consumed with creating their own families. While friends may have less of a presence in our lives over time, their impact can be profound, especially if they loved us—flaws and all—and championed our sense of worth when ours faltered.

**DISCUSSION  
POINT**

In what ways do friends contribute to your life? What qualities do you value in your most trusted friend?



# EXPECTATIONS IN MODERN MARRIAGES

## SOUL MATE (noun)

A person with whom one has a strong affinity, shared values and tastes, and often a romantic bond (dictionary.com)

## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/WeekMarrHistory](http://tinyurl.com/WeekMarrHistory)

[tinyurl.com/AAFamilies](http://tinyurl.com/AAFamilies)

[tinyurl.com/RDFriends-Marriage](http://tinyurl.com/RDFriends-Marriage)

Currently, many people expect those they marry to be “soul mates,” with whom they will engage in emotional and sexual intimacy, share household responsibilities, and enjoy companionship and support, for the rest of their lives.

According to a historical overview in *This Week* magazine (June, 2012), marriage emerged about 4,000 years ago with distinct economic and political—not romantic or emotional—aims. Families used marital unions to increase their lands and power, and to ensure the economic security of subsequent generations, by making long-term alliances through offspring that would produce heirs. During the Age of the Enlightenment in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, the notion of individuals being able to pursue happiness came into favor. In the 19th century, male suitors were financially stable enough to choose a bride and get married without parental sanction. These developments helped pave the way to marrying “for love.” Today, couples still enter into legal contracts and, if they practice a faith, religious unions, but most focus on how they can build a satisfying life together.

Though marriage is now considered to occur between equals, for a long time in the U.S., the institution primarily benefitted affluent, straight men of European heritage. Until they made advances in the 19th and 20th centuries, women were considered their husbands’ property and were expected to fulfill their spouses’ demands. As late as the 1970s married women could not secure their own credit cards. Enslaved people from Africa were considered commodities and, although they ended up forming families, they were not allowed to marry until after the end of slavery in 1865. Interracial marriage became fully legal in the U.S. in 1967, and same-sex marriage was not legal in all states until 2015.

When we first meet Jordan and Laura, they are so close emotionally, they muse about getting married. Their connection is challenged when she gets engaged to Tony, whom Jordan considers just right for her. As she focuses on their life together, Jordan suddenly feels marginalized, which those who are unattached often experience when friends get married.

Expecting one’s mate to be a romantic partner, supporter and best friend all at once can exert tremendous pressure on a relationship and cause deep disappointment. Some psychologists have suggested that married couples have unrealistic expectations about how much they can provide each other. They recommend that they maintain friendships outside of marriage to get some of their non-sexual needs met. With this in mind, it’s not hard to imagine that after settling fully into her life with Tony, Laura (along with Kiki and Vanessa) may miss, and need, what she once shared with Jordan.

## DISCUSSION POINT

What do you imagine or know to be most challenging and rewarding about being married?



# THE PRESSURES & PERKS OF BEING SINGLE



## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/CSMUnmarrieds](http://tinyurl.com/CSMUnmarrieds)

[tinyurl.com/SingleStigma](http://tinyurl.com/SingleStigma)

[tinyurl.com/AtlanticSolitude](http://tinyurl.com/AtlanticSolitude)

“Feeling ‘All the Feelings:’  
An Interview with *Significant Other*  
Director Stephen Brackett,” *Geffen Playhouse Blog*, March 2018

## PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD

Every time Jordan sees his grandmother Helene, she asks, “How’s your social life?” hoping he has found someone to love and be loved by, just as she experienced with her late husband. As caring as her intention may be, Jordan likely feels pressure with each inquiry, since his greatest desire is to find someone “to go through life with.” He worries incessantly about “...not being able to live it, and not knowing how to get it, or if I ever even will...” As *Significant Other* director Stephen Brackett notes in an interview with Geffen Playhouse Literary Associate Rachel Wiegardt-Egel, Jordan is “comically inept” in his pursuit of a partner. Ironically, his terror of remaining alone may interfere with his ability to attract a mate, since it propels him into off-putting behavior.

In addition to contending with loneliness, those who are single must deal with being stigmatized. In past centuries, a woman’s economic well-being and physical survival were at risk if she did not marry. Single people are often perceived as immature and selfish if they choose to be alone, and defective or eccentric if they don’t. University researcher Belle DePaulo, who believes the benefits of marriage are over-hyped, has studied how single people can be subject to discrimination in the workplace and in housing.

Interestingly, a majority of American citizens are now single. In an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 2015, journalist Stephanie Hane noted, “Last year, for the first time, the number of unmarried American adults outnumbered those who were married. One in 7 lives alone—about 31 million compared with 4 million in 1950... And the number of American adults who have never been married is at a historic high, around 20 percent.”

Since a person’s level of affluence and access to suitable partners, as well as the prevalence of divorce likely affect these statistics, it’s important not to make assumptions about the forces that underlie them. It can be illuminating, however, to consider what is gained by being single. Successful marriages, as the saying goes, “take work.” Couples often need to learn how to communicate effectively, especially when making significant decisions together. They need patience and forbearance to work through conflicts, and to compromise when their desires or needs differ. Those who live on their own, especially if by choice, enjoy making decisions without consulting a partner and residing, working, eating, sleeping, socializing and engaging in recreation according to their preferences. For a sense of family, they feel free to turn to friends and relations.

For those who crave a companion, as Jordan does, or have always dreamed of creating a family, the single life may seem unfulfilling. For those who enjoy their own company and find that solitude suits them, singlehood can offer intrinsic and often invisible rewards.

## DISCUSSION POINT

What advice would you give to someone who is having difficulty finding a significant other?

# WEDDING EXTRAVANGANZAS

**THE WEDDING INDUSTRY**

In the U.S., the wedding business is a \$200 billion enterprise. As of 2017, the average cost of a wedding was \$28,000, and the average number of guests was 124. According to wedding industry analysts, “63 percent of brides say that they feel pressured to have the perfect wedding.” (weddingwire.com)

**WEDDING PARTY**

The bride, groom and attendants  
(merriam-webster.com)

**SOURCE**

tinyurl.com/WedWireReport

**PHOTO CREDIT**

Pixabay/PD



As with coming-of-age celebrations such as quinceañeras and bar and bat mitzvahs, and school graduations, a wedding is a rite of passage for two people, who join together and enter into the next phase of their adult lives, which often involves setting up a home and raising children together. While weddings vary greatly across cultures, there is usually a religious or secular ceremony in which each partner affirms their commitment to the other, followed by a celebration.

In recent years, affluent families in the U.S. have spared no expense in providing extravagant weddings for their children, as well as their guests. These affairs can be magical to experience and stressful to produce. Preparations can take more than a year and may require the services of a wedding planner, who helps secure the venue, food and music. After assembling a guest list, the couple determines who among family and friends will have the honor of being attendants, such as a best man and maid of honor. Much attention is placed on what the couple and their attendants will wear, a color palette for table settings and flower arrangements. If guests travel from out of town or the wedding takes place in a special destination, the affair can last all weekend. After the wedding party practices the ceremony the day before, there is usually a “rehearsal dinner.” In religious settings, the ceremony is based upon certain rituals. If it is secular, the couple might create their own vows and have friends read poetry. The wedding celebration traditionally includes an elaborate meal, toasts to the newlyweds, dancing to music, and cutting the cake. The whole event is usually documented by a photographer and videographer.

As his friends, who are in various stages of being or becoming married, happily chatter about color schemes, flowers and food, Jordan is at once uninterested and convinced he will never have the pleasure of being the center of such a life-changing event. He is also hurt that Laura has not included him in her wedding party. Though Jordan’s dissatisfaction lies mainly in feeling left out, it also points to how the trappings of a wedding can overwhelm its purpose of bringing two people together in front of their community, as they embark on creating a meaningful and, it is hoped, durable life together.

# CAPTURING DYNAMICS AMONG FRIENDS

**SOURCE**

“Feeling ‘All the Feelings:’ An Interview with *Significant Other* Director Stephen Brackett,” *Geffen Playhouse Blog*, March 2018

*Significant Other* director Stephen Barrett has expressed interest in exploring “how the characters function in each other’s lives and how they enrich each other.” In the following writing exercise, you are invited to envision a group of friends in a scenario that draws on the dynamics among characters in *Significant Other*.

**Brainstorm**

- What does the main character want most in the world? What flaw gets in the way?
- How does the friend closest to the main character provide support?
- How does one friend make fun of the main character to cheer them on?
- How is one friend pessimistic about the main character’s prospects?
- When the closest friend suddenly gets what the main character wants, what happens?

**Write**

Give each character a name, and then imagine and write down how they interact within the scenario. Feel free to add lines of dialogue to bring each character to life.

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## SECTION 3

# PERSONNEL PROFILE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH KISHA WILSON

### **What is your title and how long have you worked at the Geffen?**

I am the Staff Accountant and Payroll Administrator. I joined the accounting department in April 2017.

### **What are your primary responsibilities?**

Each department at the Geffen submits payroll reporting, which I process so that staff members and actors get paid. I also account for all incoming revenue from different revenue streams, such as subscription and ticket sales, donors, and corporate funders.

### **What drew you to working in payroll and accounting as a profession?**

I am a “thinker” by nature. I enjoy working with numbers and computing where to allocate funds to various accounts. I also enjoy analyzing our ledgers to make sure all revenue is accounted for.

### **How and where were you trained?**

I have had over sixteen years of “on-the-job” training in the Los Angeles area. I started in accounts receivable; from there I took on payroll and then accounts payable to become well-rounded in the field of accounting. The best learning experiences exposed me to many different ways of accounting in various industries. I also studied and became a Certified Bookkeeper through the American Professional Institute of Bookkeeping.

### **What jobs have you had in other settings?**

I’ve always worked in accounting in the construction, import/export, service and medical industries. As a consultant, I’ve set up accounting systems for small businesses, and reviewed accounting processes for others.

### **How did those jobs differ from working in a non-profit theater?**

My other jobs were all with for-profit companies. I appreciate how the Geffen’s mission is to encourage, uplift and support



communities through the art of theater, throughout Los Angeles County.

### **Those unacquainted with accounting sometimes view the work as mainly “crunching numbers.” What might surprise them about the impact of your work?**

Since we provide information and insights about all aspects of the theater’s business so that informed decisions can be made about managing the budget, the integrity of what we record, calculate, analyze, and report has a huge impact on the operations of the company.

### **What do you find most challenging about your work at the Geffen?**

Ensuring that funds are allocated to the appropriate accounts.

### **What do you find most satisfying?**

The work is stimulating and provides exciting challenges. The environment is family-friendly and easygoing, but still professional. Staff members have been awesome—very welcoming and helpful—as I have gotten to know the Geffen. I also enjoy being able to just be me! ■

## SECTION 4

# AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette,” or how to behave at the theater.

**The Audience’s Role:** The audience plays an essential role at the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring the performance to life.

**Behaviors to Avoid:** Since the actors can hear the audience so clearly, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them—and fellow audience members.

These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops.

**Use of Social Media:** We appreciate you sharing your Geffen Playhouse experience via social media, but ask that you **do not do so inside the theater, where the use of electronic devices is prohibited.**

We recommend that you post your status **in the lobby after the performance**, and invite you to tag @GeffenPlayhouse and use #GeffenPlayhouse to share your experience and continue the conversation with us online.

**Audience Awareness Activity:** Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with:

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

### DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

# POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to questions selected from those suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Ask for several volunteers to share their groups' answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching *Significant Other*? Engaged? Distanced? Entertained? Bored? Conflicted? Moved? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- What did you enjoy most about the play? What did you find difficult to enjoy? Why? (Provide evidence from the production.)
- Did you identify or empathize with any of the characters? If so, which character(s) and why? If not, why not?
- Did watching how the friends interact with each other remind you of you and your friends? If so, how? If not, why not?
- How did this play affirm, expand or change what you know about getting married?
- What was the funniest moment in the play? The most moving?
- What do you think happens to Jordan after the play ends? Does he find a partner with whom to share a life? Why or why not?
- What is playwright Joshua Harmon's overarching message in the play?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, costumes and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- Would you recommend this production of *Significant Other* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?



## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

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**WATCH** Joshua Harmon discuss the origins of *Significant Other* and why he wrote this play at [tinyurl.com/HarmonYouTube](http://tinyurl.com/HarmonYouTube).

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**LEARN** why friendship can be important to one's life at [tinyurl.com/Friend21stCentury](http://tinyurl.com/Friend21stCentury).

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**CONSIDER** how to be a good friend at [tinyurl.com/PsychTGoodFriend](http://tinyurl.com/PsychTGoodFriend).

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**VIEW** *The Dream* and other works by painter Henri Rousseau, online at New York's Museum of Modern Art at [tinyurl.com/MoMARousseau](http://tinyurl.com/MoMARousseau).

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**EXPLORE** a range of upscale design options for ceremonies and weddings at [brides.com/wedding-ideas](http://brides.com/wedding-ideas).

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**LEARN** about the benefits and preconditions for enjoying solitude at [tinyurl.com/AtlanticSolitude](http://tinyurl.com/AtlanticSolitude).

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Creative Artists Agency  
Douglas Elliman Real Estate  
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Los Angeles County Arts Commission  
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Marilyn & Jeffrey Katzenberg Fund  
for Arts Education at the Geffen Playhouse  
Maurice Amado Foundation  
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Northern Trust  
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Paradigm Talent Agency  
Paramount Pictures  
Ralph M. Parsons Foundation  
Rosenthal Family Foundation  
Thomas Safran & Associates  
The Sheri & Les Biller Family Foundation  
Shay Family Foundation  
Simms/Mann Family Foundation  
Simon-Strauss Foundation  
Singer Family Foundation  
Smith Family Foundation  
Sondheim Foundation  
Stone Family Foundation  
Twentieth Century Fox  
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Westfield Group

And many more!



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