

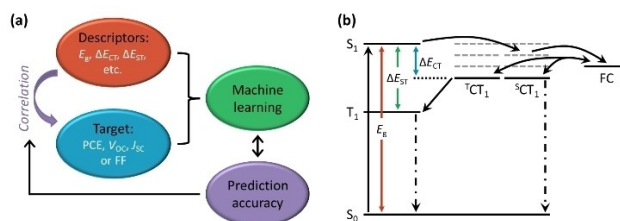
## Solar Cells

## Singlet-Triplet Energy Gap as a Critical Molecular Descriptor for Predicting Organic Photovoltaic Efficiency

Guangchao Han and Yuanping Yi\*

**Abstract:** In contrast to the inorganic and perovskite solar cells, organic photovoltaics (OPV) depend on a series of charge generation and recombination processes, which complicates molecular design to improve the power conversion efficiencies (PCEs). Herein, we first propose the singlet-triplet energy gap ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ ) as a critical molecular descriptor for predicting the PCE considering that minimizing  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is beneficial to simultaneously reduce voltage loss and triplet recombination. Remarkably, the results from data-driven machine learning verify that the prediction accuracy of the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  (Pearson's correlation coefficient  $r=0.72$ ) is apparently superior to that of two commonly used molecular descriptors in OPV, i.e., the optical gap ( $r=0.65$ ) and the driving force ( $r=0.53$ ). Moreover, an impressive prediction accuracy of  $r=0.81$  is achieved just by combining the three descriptors. This work paves the way toward rapid and precise screening of efficient OPV materials.

Organic photovoltaics (OPV) is regarded as a promising renewable energy technology due to the advantages of light weight, flexibility, non-toxicity, and ease of fabrication. Benefitting from the emergence of A-D-A small-molecule nonfullerene acceptors (NFAs), the power conversion efficiencies (PCEs) have been rapidly promoted in recent years and surpassed 18% for single-junction devices.<sup>[1–6]</sup> Nonetheless, the OPV performance still lags behind the inorganic and perovskite solar cells. Thus, in order to realize high-throughput screening and rational design of efficient OPV materials, it is urgent to identify the most relevant molecular descriptors for the photovoltaic performance (Figure 1a). However, this is not straightforward because of OPV relying on a series of optoelectronic processes (Figure 1b). Furthermore, it remains challenging to quantify the correlation of the molecular descriptors with the PCE and



**Figure 1.** a) Illustration of the role of machine learning in the research of OPV. b) Diagram of excited-state energy levels and dynamics for the charge generation and recombination processes in OPV.

the basic photovoltaic parameters, i.e., open-circuit voltage ( $V_{oc}$ ), short-circuit current density ( $J_{sc}$ ), and fill factor (FF).

To seek the important descriptors for OPV, we revisit the key charge generation and recombination processes. Singlet excitons ( $S_1$ ) firstly form upon light absorption and then diffuse to and dissociate at the donor/acceptor (D/A) interface into free carriers (FC) of holes and electrons, which subsequently migrate along the D and A materials toward and are finally extracted by the anode and cathode, respectively.<sup>[7–10]</sup> The photovoltaic optical gap ( $E_g$ ), namely, the  $S_1$  excitation energy of the narrow-band gap material, which is the threshold energy of absorbed photons, determines the upper limit of  $J_{sc}$ . The charge generation at the D/A interface consists of two steps: (1) dissociation of  $S_1$  into the interfacial singlet charge-transfer state ( $^1CT_1$ ) and (2) further separation of  $^1CT_1$  into FC. The energy difference between the  $S_1$  and  $^1CT_1$  states that provides the CT driving force ( $\Delta E_{CT}$ ) is essential for charge generation and has an important impact on the  $J_{sc}$ . On the other hand, the requirement of  $\Delta E_{CT}$  will lower the  $V_{oc}$  due to the decreased  $^1CT_1$  energy and increased non-radiative (NR) voltage loss.<sup>[11–14]</sup> Therefore, the  $E_g$  and  $\Delta E_{CT}$  are two important molecular descriptors and often used to predict the PCE according to the Scharber's model.<sup>[10,11,15–16]</sup> However, this famous model depends on the assumption of the key parameters, such as external quantum efficiency (determining  $J_{sc}$ ), NR voltage loss (determining  $V_{oc}$ ), and FF being empirical constants.

During charge migration, non-geminate recombination will result in the formation of CT excitons, with 25% singlet and 75% triplet ( $^1CT_1$ ) manifolds according to the spin statistics. The  $^1CT_1$  states can further relax to the lower-energy triplet excitons ( $T_1$ ), mostly on the narrow-band gap materials, opening a major pathway of NR energy loss.<sup>[17–21]</sup> This jeopardizes the external quantum efficiency and  $V_{oc}$ . In competition with the extraction of charges, the recombina-

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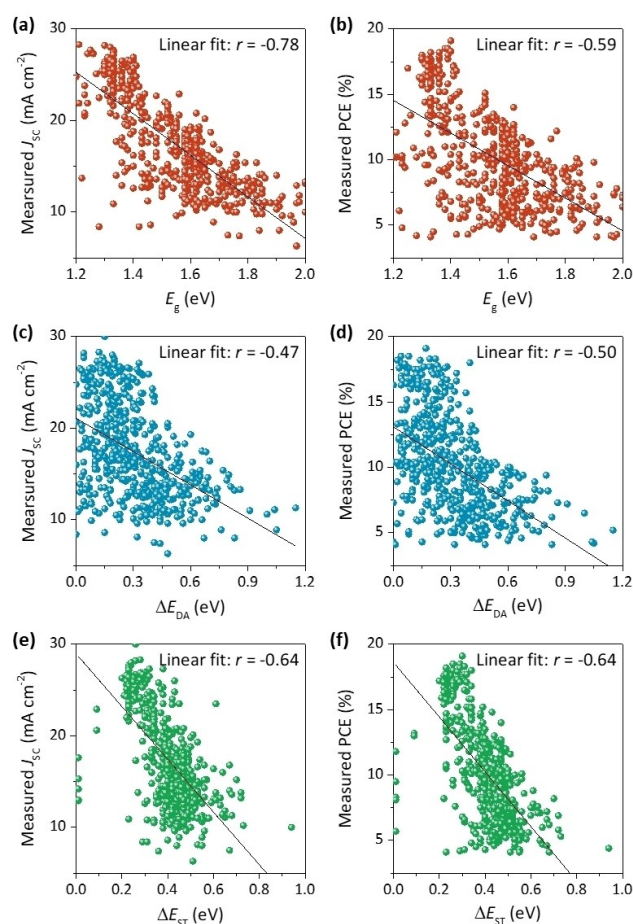
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tion to triplets will also reduce FF. Hence, suppressing the triplet recombination is critical to concurrently improve all the photovoltaic parameters. From the energetic point of view, the energy level of  $T_1$  should be close to or higher than that of  $^1CT_1$ . Meanwhile, to ensure high  $V_{oc}$ , the  $\Delta E_{CT}$  should be as small as possible. As a result, the singlet-triplet energy gap ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ , i.e., the energy difference between  $S_1$  and  $T_1$ ) needs to be minimized.<sup>[22–25]</sup> To conclude, the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of the narrow-band gap materials is correlated closely with the triplet recombination and voltage loss, implying that it can be considered as an important molecular descriptor for OPV.

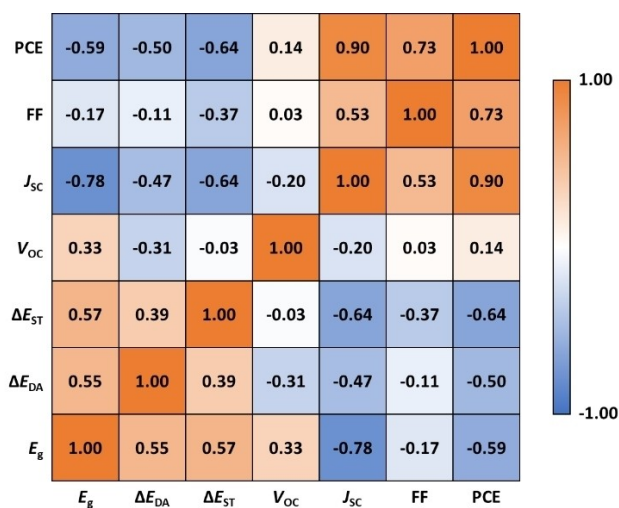
Herein, we demonstrated that the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is a critical molecular descriptor for predicting the PCE by the machine learning (ML) based on the database of 515 working OPV devices. Notably, the Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) is much superior for the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  ( $r=0.72$ ) with respect to the  $E_g$  ( $r=0.65$ ) and  $\Delta E_{CT}$  ( $r=0.53$ ). Moreover, the combination of the three molecular descriptors yields a high  $r$  of 0.81, among the best prediction to date. In contrast with dozens of descriptors required in previous ML models,<sup>[26–33]</sup> the fewest descriptors are used here, which would benefit to rapidly screen high-performance OPV materials.<sup>[34–37]</sup>

To build reliable ML models, a database containing the three molecular properties ( $E_g$ ,  $\Delta E_{CT}$ , and  $\Delta E_{ST}$ ) and four primary photovoltaic parameters ( $V_{oc}$ ,  $J_{sc}$ , FF, and PCE) was constructed. The values of  $E_g$  (determined by the onset of the absorption spectrum) and  $\Delta E_{CT}$  (approximated to be the HOMO or LUMO energy offset between donor and acceptor,  $\Delta E_{DA}$ ) in the films are obtained from the available experiments. In order to take account of the aggregation effect, the solid-state  $\Delta E_{ST}$  for the D and A materials (Table S1 and S2) were obtained by combining with theoretically calculated  $\Delta E_{ST}$  of isolated molecules or polymer chains and experimentally measured  $E_g$  in the solutions and films (see Supporting Information for more details).<sup>[22,23]</sup> The database includes the results of both fullerene and nonfullerene OPV devices (Table S3 and S4). To minimize the influence of inferior active layer morphologies, the PCEs of all the chosen OPV devices should be higher than 4 % (Figure S1).

As a preliminary step, it is useful to make direct comparison between each two quantities of the three molecular descriptors and four photovoltaic parameters (Figure 2, S2, and S3). The calculated Pearson's correlation coefficients for all the pairs are shown in Figure 3. Both the  $\Delta E_{DA}$  and  $\Delta E_{ST}$  are moderately related to the  $E_g$  ( $r=0.55$  and  $0.57$ , respectively). The former can be ascribed to the small HOMO offsets often in the narrow-band gap A-D-A NFA based OPV devices. Consistent with the previous results,<sup>[27,38]</sup> the PCE is poorly correlated with the  $V_{oc}$  ( $r=0.14$ ), but is closely correlated with the  $J_{sc}$  ( $r=0.90$ ) and FF ( $r=0.73$ ), indicating that regulating the molecular properties relevant to the  $J_{sc}$  and FF is important to improve the PCE. Apparently, all the three molecular properties are negatively correlated with the  $J_{sc}$  and PCE. As expected, the  $E_g$  exhibits a high correlation with the  $J_{sc}$  ( $r=-0.78$ ). The negative correlation between the  $\Delta E_{DA}$  and  $J_{sc}$  ( $r=-0.47$ ) demonstrates that the  $\Delta E_{DA}$  can be minimized without sacrificing



**Figure 2.** Measured  $J_{sc}$  and PCE versus  $E_g$  (a, b),  $\Delta E_{DA}$  (c, d), and  $\Delta E_{ST}$  (e, f).



**Figure 3.** Pearson's correlation coefficients between each two quantities of the three molecular properties and four photovoltaic parameters.

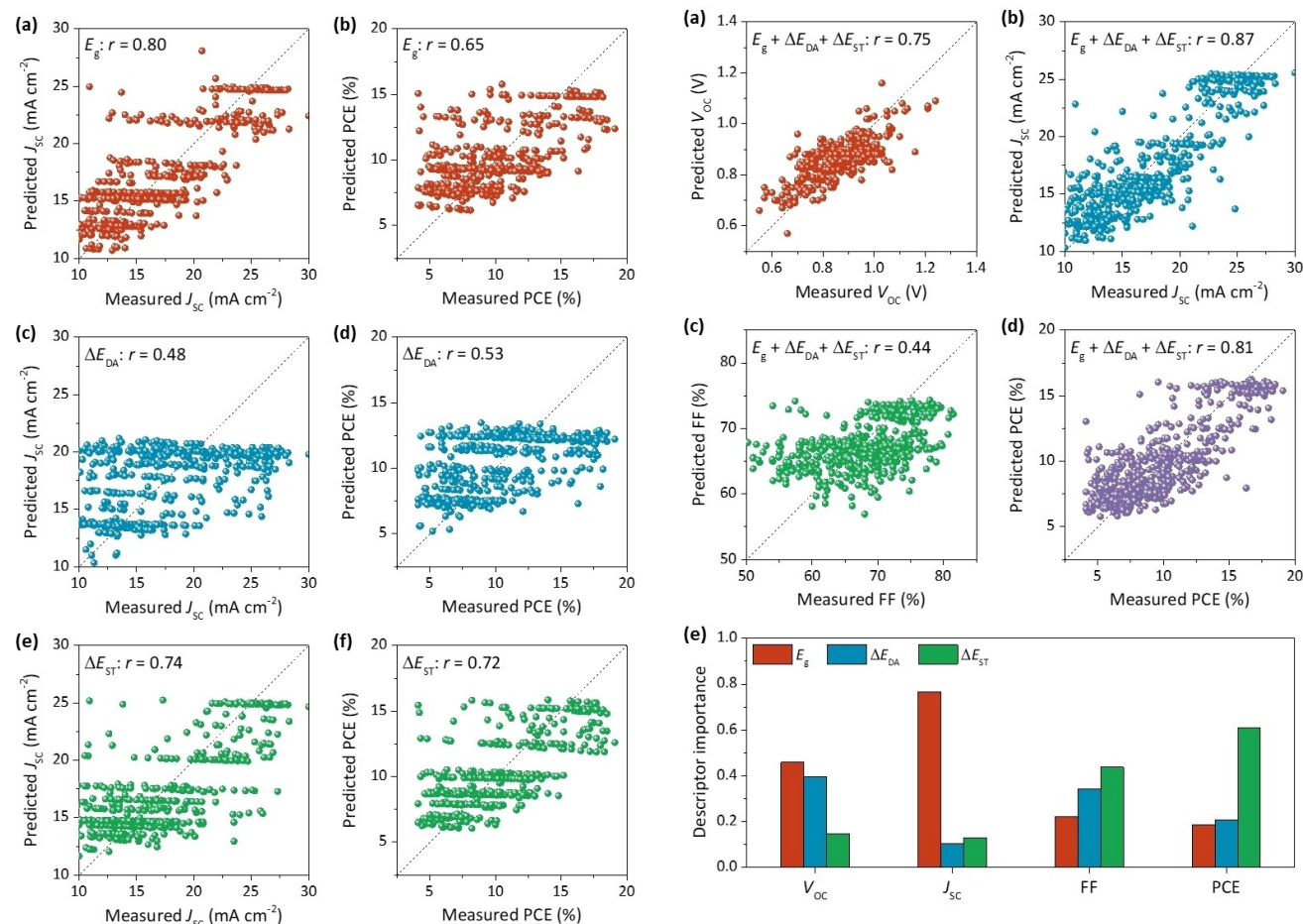
charge generation.<sup>[39]</sup> Relatively, the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  shows a weaker correlation with the  $J_{sc}$  ( $r=-0.64$ ). Nevertheless, the correlation with the PCE is stronger for the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  ( $r=-0.64$ )

than the  $E_g$  ( $r = -0.59$ ). This can be ascribed to the more negative correlation of the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  with the FF ( $r = -0.37$ ) caused by the role of  $\Delta E_{ST}$  in regulating triplet recombination.

Next, we established ML models with every one or two and all the three molecular descriptors to predict the four photovoltaic parameters. Three typical ML algorithms, namely, linear regression (LR),  $k$ -nearest neighbors (KNN), and gradient boosting regression tree (GBRT) were implemented by using the Scikit-Learn.<sup>[40]</sup> For each ML model, the leave-one-out (LOO) cross validation was carried out, with all data points except one as a training set to train the specific model and the remaining one as a test set to validate the model's prediction. The prediction accuracy is quantified by the Pearson's correlation coefficient, which was calculated by the predicted and actual values of each point in the test set for every LOO iteration. In most cases, GBRT performs slightly better than KNN and much better than the simplest LR (Table S5).<sup>[26]</sup> Hence, the GBRT results are used to analyze the underlying relationships.

The plots of GBRT predicted PCE with a single descriptor of the  $E_g$ ,  $\Delta E_{DA}$ , or  $\Delta E_{ST}$  versus the measured  $J_{sc}$  or PCE are displayed in Figure 4. The prediction accuracy of  $J_{sc}$  using the  $E_g$  ( $r = 0.80$ ) or  $\Delta E_{ST}$  ( $r = 0.74$ ) is higher than

that using  $\Delta E_{DA}$ . Remarkably, the prediction accuracy of PCE is evidently higher for the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  ( $r = 0.72$ ) than for the  $E_g$  ( $r = 0.65$ ) and  $\Delta E_{DA}$  ( $r = 0.53$ ), demonstrating that the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  can be considered as a critical descriptor for predicting the PCE. In contrast, the prediction accuracies of  $V_{oc}$  and FF using a single descriptor are much poorer (Table S5). When using all the three molecular descriptors, the prediction accuracies are significantly increased. The improved accuracy of  $V_{oc}$  ( $r = 0.75$ , Figure 5a) is primarily due to that the combination of  $E_g$  and  $\Delta E_{DA}$ , which determines the CT<sub>1</sub> energy, has a good correlation with the  $V_{oc}$  ( $r = 0.70$ ). The descriptor importance for the GBRT model also indicates that the prediction of  $V_{oc}$  is dominated by the  $E_g$  and  $\Delta E_{DA}$  (Figure 5e). We note that the importance of  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is non-negligible, which can be attributed to the NR voltage loss caused by triplet recombination.<sup>[19,20]</sup> As expected, the high prediction accuracy for  $J_{sc}$  ( $r = 0.87$ , Figure 5b) mainly depends on the  $E_g$ , and the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  has a higher importance than the  $\Delta E_{DA}$  (Figure 5e). Because of lacking of morphologically related descriptors, the prediction accuracy for FF ( $r = 0.44$ , Figure 5c) remains not high, and the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  exhibits the highest importance among the three descriptors (Figure 5e). Along with the improved prediction for  $V_{oc}$ ,  $J_{sc}$  and



**Figure 4.** Predicted  $J_{sc}$  and PCE by GBRT with a single descriptor of  $E_g$  (a, b),  $\Delta E_{DA}$  (c, d), or  $\Delta E_{ST}$  (e, f) versus measured PCE and  $J_{sc}$ .

**Figure 5.** a–d) Predicted  $V_{oc}$ ,  $J_{sc}$ , FF, and PCE by GBRT with all the three descriptors versus corresponding measured values. e) Descriptor Importance in the GBRT models.



FF, a prominent predictive performance is obtained for the PCE ( $r=0.81$ , Figure 5d). This is among the best PCE's prediction so far and only three descriptors are required,<sup>[26–33]</sup> which benefits for high-throughput screening of potential OPV candidates. Moreover, the importance of  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is much higher than the other two descriptors (Figure 5e), confirming that the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is critical to determine the PCE.

Finally, it is imperative to discuss how to effectively reduce the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  for designing high-performance OPV materials. A common strategy is maximizing the intramolecular CT effect (i.e., minimizing the overlap between the HOMO and LUMO wavefunctions), which has been successfully used to design thermally activated decay fluorescence molecules for highly efficient organic light-emitting diodes.<sup>[41,42]</sup> Figure S4 shows the chemical structures and frontier molecular orbitals of three representative OPV polymers (P3HT, PffBT4-2OD, and N2200). As the intramolecular CT effect gets stronger from P3HT to PffBT4-2OD and to N2200, the calculated  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is substantially decreased (Figure 6a). In particular, the vertical (adiabatic)  $\Delta E_{ST}$  for N2200 is as small as 0.2 (0.01) eV. Nevertheless, the much reduced HOMO–LUMO overlap will inevitably result in small oscillator strength ( $f$ ) for the  $S_1$  state and weak light absorption, which is adverse to realizing high  $J_{sc}$  and limits the PCEs of N2200-based OPV devices within 12%.<sup>[43,44]</sup> Interestingly, owing to modest intramolecular CT effect, A-D-A NFAs exhibit moderate  $\Delta E_{ST}$  (e.g., 0.4–0.5 eV for ITIC, IT-4F, and Y6) and large  $f$  ( $\approx 3$ ) in the isolated molecules. Furthermore, end-group  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking, which are frequently present in the films, can decrease the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  to  $\approx 0.3$  eV without sacrificing  $f$  (Figure 6a). Thus, the A-D-A NFAs have both strong light absorption and relatively small  $\Delta E_{ST}$ .<sup>[23,24]</sup> This is responsible for the high  $J_{sc}$  and FF in the low-driving-force NF OPV devices.<sup>[1–6]</sup>

In summary, the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is proposed as an effective molecular descriptor to predict the OPV PCE in view of the crucial role of  $\Delta E_{ST}$  in controlling the charge generation and recombination processes. The data-driven machine-learning results verify that the PCE exhibits evidently higher correlation with the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  ( $r=0.72$ ) than the two conventional descriptors,  $E_g$  ( $r=0.65$ ) and  $\Delta E_{DA}$  ( $r=0.53$ ). Because enhancing the intramolecular CT effect can reduce both the oscillator strength and  $S_1$  energy and the end-group  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking reduced  $\Delta E_{ST}$  comes mostly from the decreased  $S_1$

energy (Figure 6b), the  $\Delta E_{ST}$ , to some extent, is linearly correlated to the  $E_g$  ( $r=0.57$ ). Moreover, because the weakly bound polaron pairs formed in strong D–A copolymers can be regarded as the precursor of free charge carriers, the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  can be also relevant to charge generation.<sup>[45–47]</sup> Consequently, the  $\Delta E_{ST}$  is associated with the oscillator strength,  $E_g$ , and charge generation in an indirect way, thus increasing the prediction for  $J_{sc}$  ( $r=0.74$ ) and PCE. Remarkably, the combination of  $\Delta E_{ST}$ ,  $E_g$ , and  $\Delta E_{DA}$  results in the prediction accuracy as high as 0.81, which is among the best PCE prediction. Although the evaluation of the three descriptors here relies on syntheses and experimental absorption spectra and energy levels, this work could open an avenue to high-throughput screening of new OPV materials considering efficient computational approaches being actively developed to calculate these parameters in the solid state.<sup>[39]</sup>

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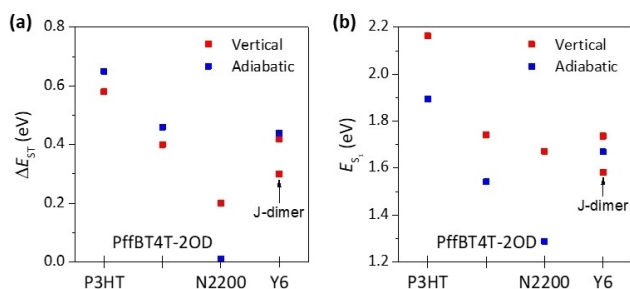
## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

**Keywords:** Energy Gap • Machine Learning • Singlet-Triplet • Solar Cells • Triplet Recombination



**Figure 6.** Calculated vertical and adiabatic  $\Delta E_{ST}$  (a) and  $S_1$  energies (b) for P3HT, PffBT4-2OD, N2200, and Y6.

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