

# The Formula 1 Sexual Harassment Scandal Is Not Very Scandalous

*Janice Fiamengo*





Over the past month and a half, the Formula One racing world has been roiled by reports that [Red Bull team](#) principal [Christian Horner](#), winner of 13 world titles, sexually harassed an employee of Red Bull (now revealed to be his personal assistant, [Fiona Hewitson](#)) by sending her sexual messages and images, including, as it seems, a picture of his penis. As the feminist machinery springs into action, the case illuminates, once again, how murky many harassment allegations really are—which may not be enough to save Horner, who is once again under investigation.

It all began quietly enough when Red Bull commissioned [an independent legal investigation](#) into a complaint of inappropriate and controlling behavior by Horner. Horner was [cleared of wrongdoing in that investigation](#), but shortly after it was complete, a [Google Drive trove](#) of WhatsApp messages, allegedly sent between Horner and the assistant (though not yet verified), was delivered anonymously to media sources and various F1 officials and team principals.

Within days, Horner's accuser, Hewitson, [was suspended with pay](#), and since then, speculation has swirled about the [person\(s\) behind the documents release](#) and whether there is [a move to unseat Horner](#) within Red Bull, with one team member [urging his removal](#). Hewitson has recently [filed an appeal with the FIA](#) (the International Automobile Federation), claiming that her treatment by Red Bull is typical of what happens to women who complain about sexual mistreatment. Interest in the story has been heightened by the fact that [Horner is a married man](#) whose wife, [Geri Halliwell](#), is former Spice Girl Ginger Spice.

Sources reporting on the "[sexting scandal](#)" have made the case sound like textbook harassment: Horner, the powerful man at the head of the Red Bull team, was "inappropriate" with a subordinate, behaving like any "[creepy old man hitting on a young woman](#)." [One site](#) gave the following summation: "Horner allegedly asked the employee about her outfit choices and her flexibility, as well as requested selfies. It's alleged Horner also asked the employee to 'delete this chat please.'" These details are true so far as they go, but there is much more, as we'll see below, including comments by Hewitson that show her near-equal interest in Horner. If there is justice in her complaint, it certainly isn't established by the WhatsApp cache.

Lack of evidence, however, hasn't stopped feminist pundits from doing their thing, pronouncing on [misogyny and rampant workplace misconduct](#) within the F1 racing community. "[Allegations Against Christian Horner Should Be a Wake-Up Call for F1](#)," ran the headline of the most dogmatic magazine article, by Elizabeth Blackstock in *The Drive*: "It's high time for F1 to address its longstanding power

imbalances.” The article is vintage feminist over-statement.



Blackstock had not read the documents in the leaked Google Drive cache. But that is her point: she doesn't have to. It is enough for there to have been an allegation for Blackstock to launch a tirade about the racing world's unacknowledged problem with predatory masculinity.

She admits as much in her opening paragraph: “No matter how you feel about Horner or the incident in question,” she alleges, “it

should serve as an opportunity for the historically masculine world of F1 to challenge its long history of power imbalances—especially as it pertains to gender.” Note the seamless transition from *masculine world* to *power imbalances*. If it’s a field that men built and enjoy, it must be in need of a shame-filled reckoning. In case the pre-determined nature of Blackstock’s conclusion isn’t already clear enough, she repeats her contention that “No matter the findings of the investigation, a very powerful man in F1 acted in a way that made a subordinate woman uncomfortable enough to report his behavior and seek redress, and that is a power imbalance that F1 needs to address if it intends to continue its current growth.”

Whatever happened, then, not only Red Bull but the entire F1 industry needs to start making unspecified (but surely extensive!) reparations to women. The female complainant is said to be “seeking redress,” not asserting power of her own. Her motives, of course—not to mention her actions—must not be questioned.

The rest of the article is extraordinarily thin on substance and heavy on the type of complaint some women make when they want to stress their attractiveness. Researcher Chris Weisberg calls it the *grumble brag*: “I’ve lost count of how many times someone has sneakily snapped my picture,” Blackstock laments of her time covering F1, “and at one race I attended, a group of men surrounded me in a grandstand and refused to let me leave until I gave them my phone number.” Blackstock was so powerless, it seems, that a whole group of men fell helplessly under her power. She ends by reiterating her central claim: “*Even if a jury were to find Horner innocent, it would still not invalidate the complainant’s initial issue: that she felt someone else’s behavior toward her prevented her from doing her job.*”

That is where we are in the now-dominant feminist conversation about workplace ethics: the woman’s feelings constitute reality. That such a position can be taken by a so-called journalist in 2024, even in the absence of any proof of wrongdoing, indicates the striking success feminist activists have had in their framing of work-related sex as an intolerable male abuse.

Let’s admit up front that there is a nub of truth to the five decades of feminist advocacy on this subject, launched with Catharine MacKinnon’s [Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination](#) (1979) and dramatically increased after [Anita Hill’s testimony against Clarence Thomas](#) in 1991. There have been, and undoubtedly still are, some sexually-aggressive men who have made their female employees’ lives hell. Nobody believes such behavior is acceptable or trivial, and it is illegal everywhere in the western world. It’s so universally frowned upon, in fact, that a company that fails to discipline an employee who harasses another (or even seems to harass another) [is liable for damages claimed by the accuser](#).

In the case of Horner and Hewitson—if the text messages are genuine—it’s hard to deny that Horner’s behavior was unprofessional. He

was a married man sending sexy messages and carrying on in the flesh with a younger woman who worked for him directly. He wasn't thinking of the team's best interests when he was phoning Hewitson late at night for a mutual masturbation session.

Beyond that, however, the familiar feminist narrative of the victimized woman is in many details inaccurate, mainly because of its simplistic assumptions about power. Yes, Horner had more power in the company than Hewitson (and younger women are often attracted to men with power) but that isn't proof he abused it or even *could*.

Women, of course, have power too. A young woman's hold over an older man can be substantial enough to turn his life upside down (as may well have been the case, at least for a season, with Horner): it can cause him to destroy a marriage that he otherwise would have maintained, neglect his work, make serious errors in judgement, and even risk his life for sexual obsession or amorous preoccupation. (All these *might* be reason to forbid sexual relationships altogether in the workplace, but they are not feminist reasons.) The moment a man like Horner puts words to his desire—especially if he puts them in text or email, but even if he does not—he becomes vulnerable to precisely the mess in which Horner is now embroiled, which can lead to disgrace and job loss. (Whatever happens with Hewitson, she is not going to be cast out as a sexual predator.)





The feminist injunction to men—Just keep it in your pants!—is insufficient and unrealistic. Many people (especially work-driven individuals) spend the majority of their waking adult lives in workplaces, and it is inhumane to expect that some will not seek, often honorably or at least not abusively, to find a romantic partner there. Moreover, even a man who never did anything beyond make a joke or observation, or not even that, can find himself accused and destroyed.

The Christian Horner case is a good example of the ambiguity of what we now label harassment because it is neither one thing nor the other. Horner is not innocent—he was foolish and boorish—but neither was he the predatory abuser pictured by ideologues. Hewitson may have felt “uncomfortable,” as Blackstock alleges, but if so, it was because of her decision to become sexually involved with a married man at work.

The WhatsApp messages give only a slice of the story, of course, but the outline seems clear enough: there was a sexual affair that went sour, seemingly because Hewitson started having second thoughts about it. “For sure I don’t understand if someone is happily married why they then try and get with someone else,” she tells him at one point. “It’s more understandable if your unhappy.” It’s possible that she wanted her lover to complain about his wife so that she would have ammunition for the future; or perhaps she wanted to romanticize what they were doing. Horner’s only explanation was vague and, from Hewitson’s perspective, surely unsatisfying: “I’ve never been very good at dealing with emotions but I know that and your one of the very few people I can talk to and that’s why I’m sad when I feel there is distance between us. There u have it.” Perhaps he was unhappy at home for reasons he wouldn’t say. Perhaps he is a bounder with a roving eye. There is no indication that he was harassing an unwilling woman.

The texts make clear that the affair went beyond flirting: “Hope you enjoyed your blast in Bahrain,” Hewitson writes to Horner. “Amazing, hope you did,” comes his happy answer. “Still waiting but it was fun to make you.” “U wouldn’t let me,” “Haha you couldn’t hold on long enough.” It’s not quite clear whether Hewitson’s “Still waiting” was meant as a reproach or an invitation. Most men would probably accept the challenge.

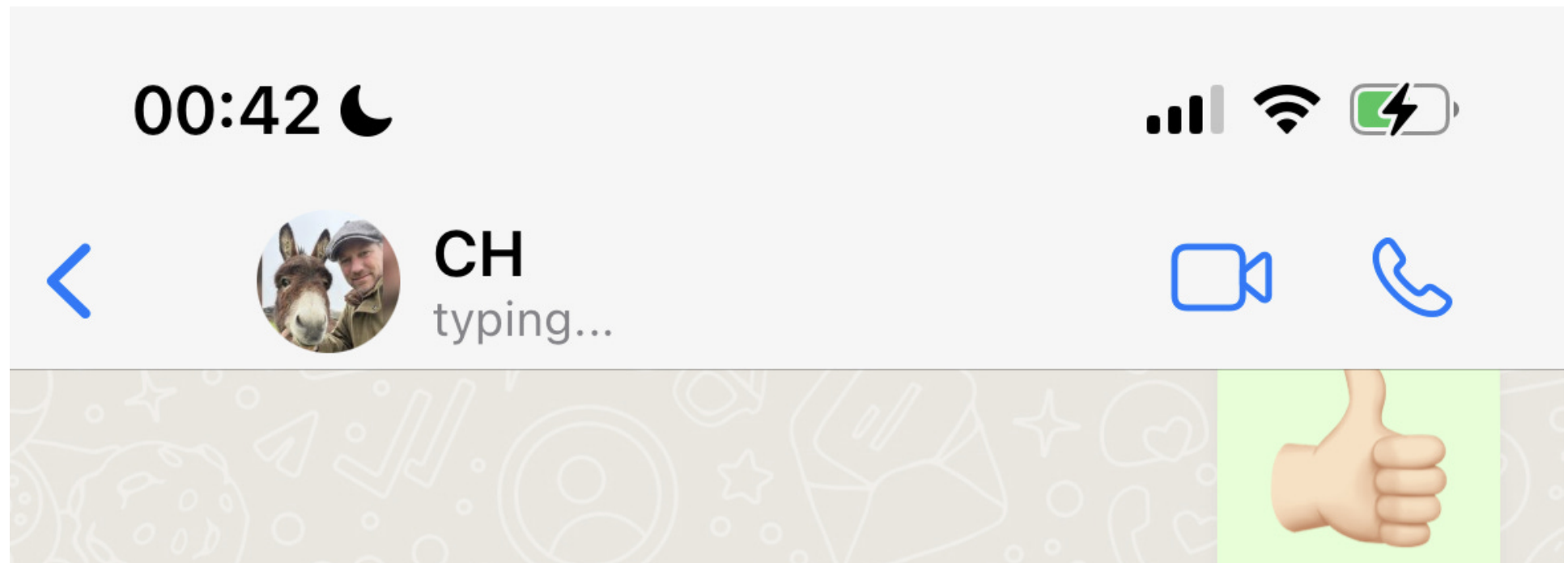
The sexual aspect cooled when it became evident that Horner couldn’t or wouldn’t commit. “Thought u liked it?” he asks in a later message, wanting steamy talk by video-phone. “I never said I didn’t ... but I can’t do that anymore.” She accuses him of making her feel as if he is “calling a porn channel” when he wants her to talk to him while he masturbates. She can’t get past the fact of his wife: “It’s very flattering that you find me attractive and like me but if your happy then it’s just wrong. I then have to act in front of Geri. But if you

are unhappy you can tell me.” It’s possible that if Horner had been able to craft a plausible story about why he needed the affair but couldn’t leave his wife, Hewitson might have been satisfied, at least for a time.

Most of the rest of the texts consist of Horner asking for sexy pictures or a chance to video-chat, and attempting to rekindle what they had: “trying to understand where boundaries are as there didn’t used to be any,” he says plaintively at one point. Hewitson, for her part, doesn’t sound at all like a damsel in distress. Refusing to answer his call one night, she texts, “Night night.” “Brutal,” he texts back. “Yep,” she responds. “Shame,” he concedes. The message shows a man who took No for an answer; Hewitson seems to have decided, perhaps regretfully, that No was the only dignified way out.

That’s all we find in the WhatsApp material: no evidence of abuse of power or controlling behavior. Why Hewitson ultimately decided to make a formal complaint against Horner—and whether anything else of import occurred between them—may never be known. On the surface, their story seems quite ordinary, and rather sad or sordid, depending on one’s point of view: a man and a woman attracted to each other for a time, each wanting something the other wouldn’t give.

The story does not deserve to be public business, and definitely doesn’t require a collective apology from motorsports men. While raising thorny issues about workplace sexual behavior, it shows that feminist theory is singularly ill-equipped to deal with them.







But was fun to make you 00:39 ✓✓

u wouldn't let me 😂 00:40

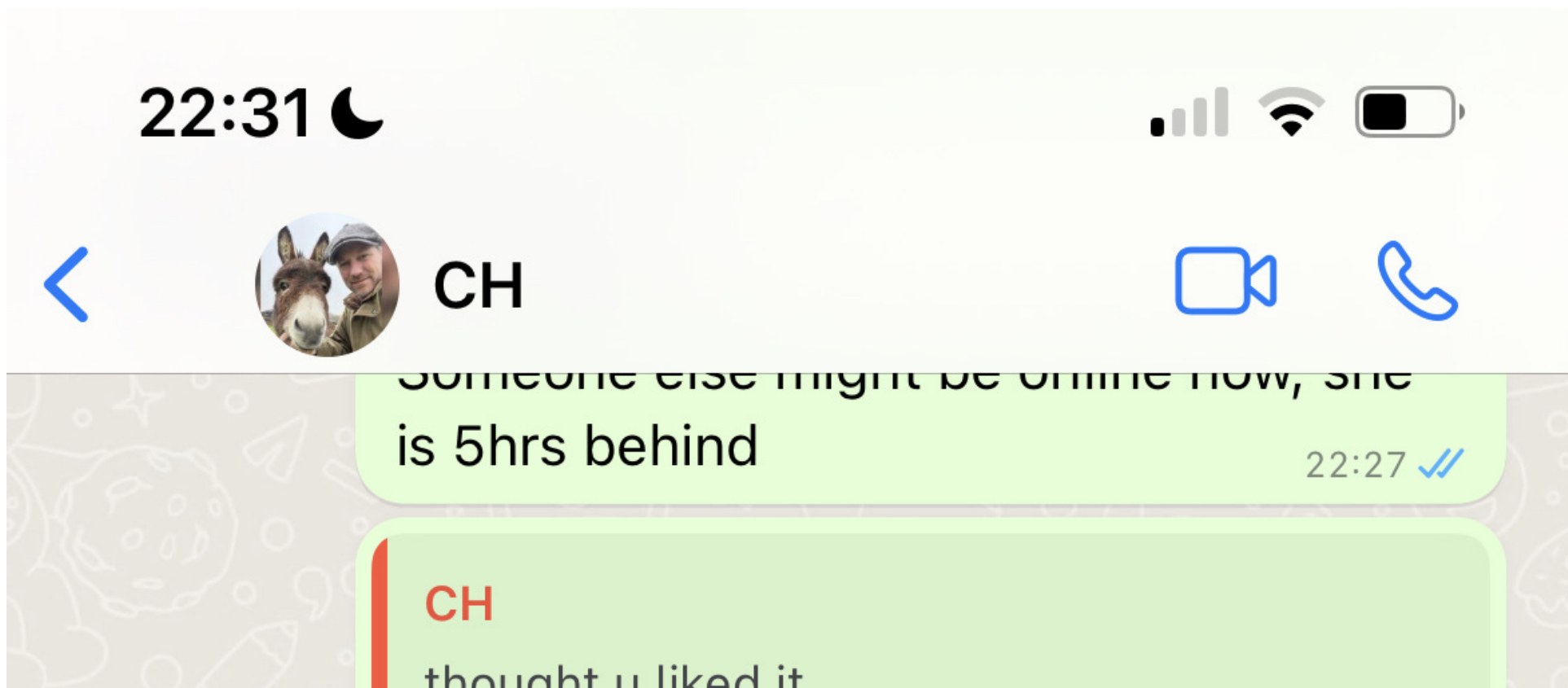
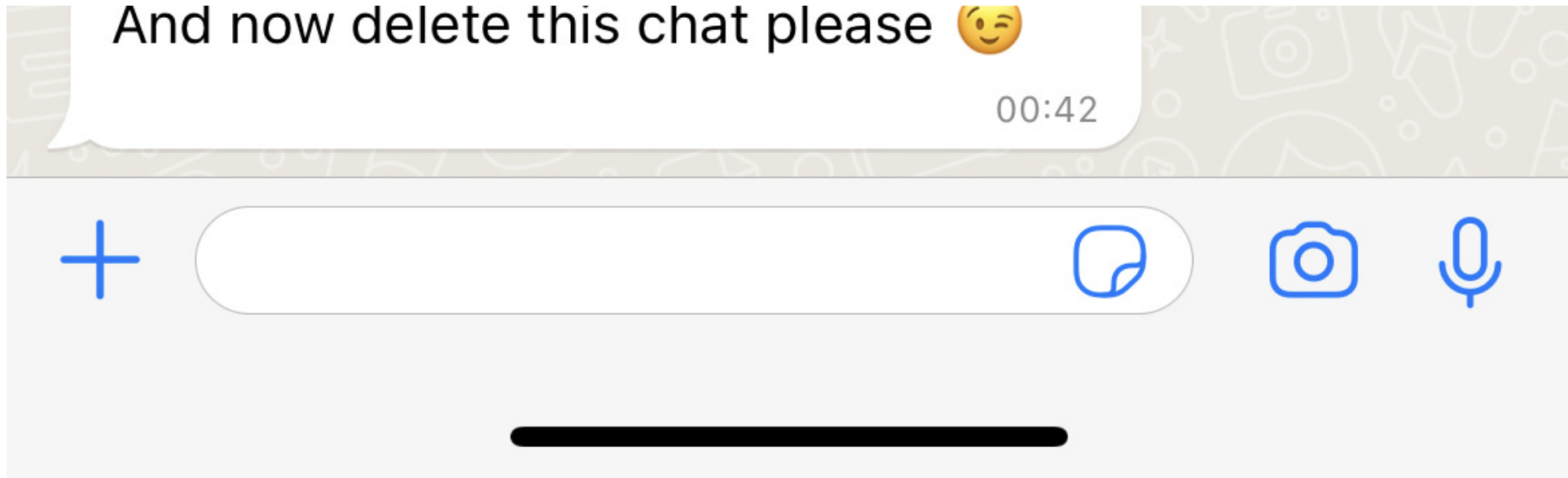
Haha you couldn't hold on long enough

00:41 ✓✓



00:41

1 UNREAD MESSAGE





talk to help you explode

22:29 ✓✓

That's basically like calling a porn channel 😂

22:29 ✓✓

exactly 😂😂

22:30

good for both

22:30

Stop

22:30 ✓✓

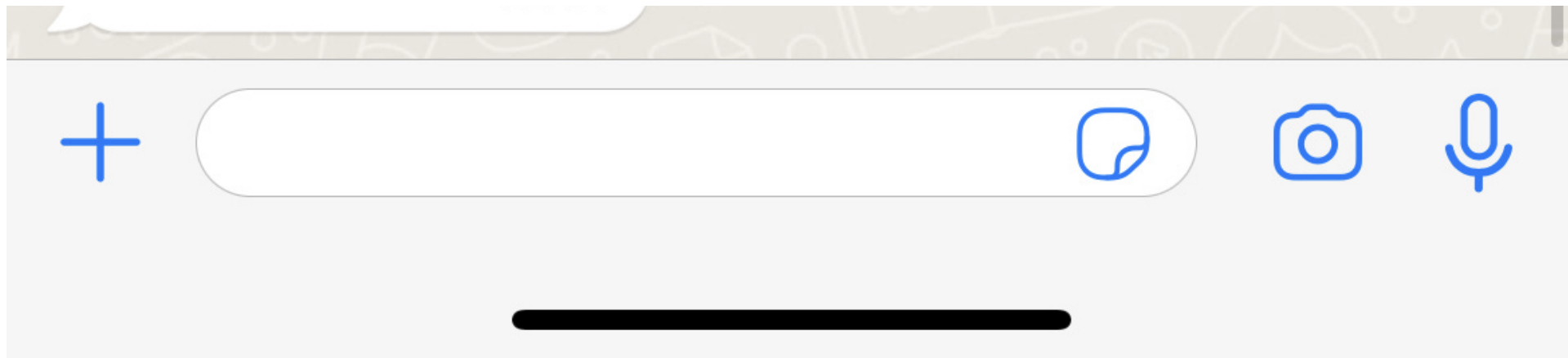
Good night

22:30 ✓✓

1 UNREAD MESSAGE

ok good night

22:31



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