Axiological Affiliation: Exploring the Discursive Identity Construction of New Media Editorial Staff in Contemporary China

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Abstract: China's new media industry is witnessing significant and ongoing growth, with new media practitioners playing a vital role within it. This study delves into the identity construction of three young new media editorial staff (NMES) through the lens of shared values. The results of semi-structured interviews with NMES were analyzed qualitatively using Nvivo 15, guided by the affiliation framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The findings reveal that the identity network of NMES is built upon value bonds formed through attitude-ideation couplings across three principal topics: industry characteristics, work deficiencies, and personal growth. Specifically, NMES often experience monotonous work, which appears to serve as a central identity bond. Such repetitive work, characterized by low entry barriers, leads to intense competition and high staff turnover in the new media industry. Despite their high value on personal growth, the monotony of work impedes their capacity enhancement. This is probably tied to the fact that they are in the early stages of their careers. These young, early-career professionals need to break free from the repetitive work, enhance skills to stay competitive, and thereby protect their professional identities.

1. Introduction

The new media industry in China is experiencing substantial and continuous expansion, with live streaming e-commerce transactions exceeding 3 trillion yuan and short video platform users surpassing one billion in 2023 [1, 2]. For the burgeoning new media industry, the number of new media practitioners (NMPs) has surpassed 15 million, comprising five categories: investors of new media enterprises, management personnel, editorial staff, technicians, and online opinion leaders [2, 3]. Their impact on China's socio-economic development has grown substantially, and they also play a pivotal role in disseminating public information, shaping public opinion, and thereby influencing the course of public affairs [4-6].

Enhancing research on the identity of NMPs and related challenges in their identity construction will provide deeper insights for researchers and decision-makers into their social mindset and

aspirations, assisting government agencies in more effectively helping NMPs to play their social roles [7, 8]. Existing scholarly work has examined the identity development of journalists, live streamers, and opinion leaders among NMPs [6, 9-15]. However, research on editorial staff remains notably scarce. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining how shared values are applied to perform identities of the new media editorial staff (NMES) in interviews.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Identity and NMPs

Several studies have delved into the process of identity performance among NMPs. In the mobile social networking era, opinion leaders' identities have shifted from conventional celebrities to micro-celebrities [13]. In virtual book communities, some opinion leaders have established their identities primarily through expressing assessments, perspectives, or stances in their forum posts [14]. Influenced by commodified 'personae', some female live streamers underwent significant alienation between their occupational and personal identities [15], while many grassroots online hosts experienced serious discrepancies between their social and media identities [11]. Additionally, virtual emotional communities enhanced community membership for both live streamers and fans [10]. Some journalists in China and Brazil encountered role disparities as they transitioned from traditional journalism to new media [9, 12].

Given the above review, the current literature has primarily focused on identity performance among opinion leaders, live streamers, and journalists, with limited attention given to NMES. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate how NMES in China construct their identities in in-depth interviews, expecting to provide a comprehensive understanding of NMPs' identity formation.

2.2 Identity and Narrative

Personal experience plays an important role in shaping identity. De Fina explores how migrants use narratives to negotiate their identities by blending personal experiences with cultural and societal expectations [16]. For example, migrants may emphasize themes of resilience and transformation in their narratives, framing their journeys as stories of overcoming adversity and achieving personal growth. Similarly, Bamberg highlights how individuals use narratives to position themselves in relation to dominant cultural discourses, often resisting or redefining societal stereotypes [17]. For instance, members of marginalized groups may use counter-narratives to challenge negative stereotypes and assert alternative identities that reflect their unique experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the role of personal experience in identity construction is not limited to individual narratives but also extends to collective narratives that shape group identities. For example, communities may construct shared narratives that highlight common experiences of struggle, resilience, and solidarity, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity and belonging [18]. These collective narratives often draw on personal experiences to create a shared sense of history and purpose, reinforcing group cohesion and mobilizing collective action. In this way, personal experiences serve as the building blocks for both individual and collective identities, shaping how individuals and groups understand themselves and their place in the world.

2.2 Identity and Affiliation

Some studies have highlighted the role of shared values in shaping member identity within communities or groups [10]. For instance, in virtual emotional communities, live streamers and fans strengthen their sense of belonging through shared perspectives rooted in common interests and

similar emotional experiences. Essentially, shared values foster a sense of affiliation among group or community members by creating profound and inherent value bonds.

Martin integrated language users into the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) system, and proposed the affiliation frameworks (see Figure 1) to analyse the affiliation relationship [19-21]. Affiliation refers to the process through which individuals establish connections with other social members to negotiate identities within sub-cultures, master identities, and the broader culture [17]. By emphasizing shared values among individual members, affiliation provides a novel approach and analytical framework for identity studies [22, 23].

Research has explored affiliation relationships between members and groups. Knight found that through conversations, participants either embrace or reject 'value bonds' to build group identities, a process labelled as 'dialogue affiliation' [24-26]. Zhao expanded Knight's concept of dialogic affiliation by examining 'axiological affiliation' in a Chinese live job interview program [27]. Following Zhao, this research employs axiological affiliation to describe the process through which NMES affiliate with others based on shared values. Zappavigna and her colleagues examined how users create ambient communities with others who share common values through social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube, even without direct interactions. This phenomenon was termed 'ambient affiliation' [28-34].
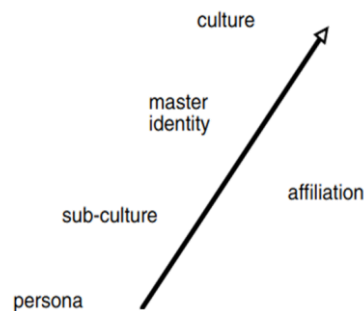

Figure 1: The affiliation framework (adapted from Martin 2010: 24).

Considering the analysis provided, the affiliation framework is well-suited for examining how group members construct their identities around shared values. Therefore, this study utilizes the affiliation framework to investigate the role of shared values in the identity construction of NMES in new media industry in semi-structured interviews. The following two central questions will be explored:

(1) What shared values do NMES embrace?
(2) How do these values shape their identities as NMES?

3. Methodology and Analytical Framework

3.1 Informants and Contacts

Three informants were sourced from a new media hub in Chongqing, China, where multiple new media enterprises were located. Random interviews were initially planned with staff members, with a total of 20 individuals being invited to participate. However, ten declined the invitation, and another four were found not to be NMPs, rendering them ineligible for the study. Ultimately, six individuals engaged in face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

Three informants, comprising one producer, one editor, and one cameraperson, were selected for this study. Their job titles fall under the categories of NMES. Background information for these informants is presented in Table 1. All three informants are in their twenties, hold bachelor's

degrees, and consist of one female and two males with an average work experience of more than three years.

Table 1: Background information of the informants.

	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Work experience (yr)
1	Female	25	Bachelor's degree	Producer	3
2	Male	25	Bachelor's degree	Screenwriter, editor	4
3	Male	26	Bachelor's degree	Cameraperson	4

3.2 Interview Design

Anna De Fina has extensively explored how identity is constructed through interviews. She argues that identity is deeply embedded in the narratives individuals tell about their lives [16]. Central to De Fina's methodology is narrative analysis, which uses interviews as a primary tool for collecting data on identity construction. She highlights the importance of narratives as both a reflection and a medium of identity formation. De Fina advocates for semi-structured or open-ended interviews that allow participants to share their stories freely and in their own words. She emphasizes the need for researchers to avoid leading questions and instead create a conversational space where participants can construct their narratives organically [35]. Besides, interviews effectively reveal an interpretive and reflective pattern that unfolds over time [36], as informants recount and reflect on their life and professional experiences across extended periods. By conducting a thorough analysis of these interpretive reflections, researchers can uncover the underlying shared values that play a pivotal role in shaping the informants' identities as ESGs. Based on the considerations, the semi-structured interview is conducted in the present study.

Before the interview, informants would be informed about the interview's objectives, so they could decide whether or not to participate. The interview commences solely upon receipt of the informed consent from those informants who are willing to participate. The interview was conducted anonymously to protect the informants' personal information. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in July, 2024. Informants were expected to offer a thorough account of their personal lives, professional experiences, and corresponding attitudes since their entry into the new media industry. Should the informant's narrative be insufficient or off-topic, some guiding questions will be employed to guarantee that the conversation remains relevant and informative. Throughout the interview, the interviewer's interference was minimized.

3.3 Data Collection

The corpus of discourses comprises a total of 21,349 Chinese characters, transcribed from 70 minutes' interview audio recordings, with each interview averaging approximately 23 minutes in length. The selected segments for analysis in the subsequent sections were translated independently by three doctoral candidates specializing in English. A final version was produced by comparing their translations to ensure fidelity to the original text.

Topics from the interview discourses were initially classified by NVivo 15, a software for qualitative data analysis. The researcher and assistants conducted independent analyses of the discourses, resolving any discrepancies in classification through consultation. Topic frequency was tallied after careful coding and repeated readings of the interview transcripts, and the principal topics plus relevant examples were displayed in tables. The most frequent topics were further analyzed with sub-topics and examples. Discussions focused on essential couplings, shared values, and bonds for identity construction among the most frequently occurring topics.

3.4 Analytical Framework

This study applies the notions of couplings, shared values, value bonds, and bond networks from the affiliation framework to analyze the discursive identities of NMES in interviews. As Zappavigna and Martin highlight, couplings are essential in social affiliation, representing the concurrent selection of diverse meanings within discourse [34]. These couplings can manifest as pairs, groups, or a larger interconnected structure [19]. If a coupling gains recognition and acceptance among group members, it transforms into a shared value, and then serves as the basis of a value bond and contributes to the construction of broader bond networks.
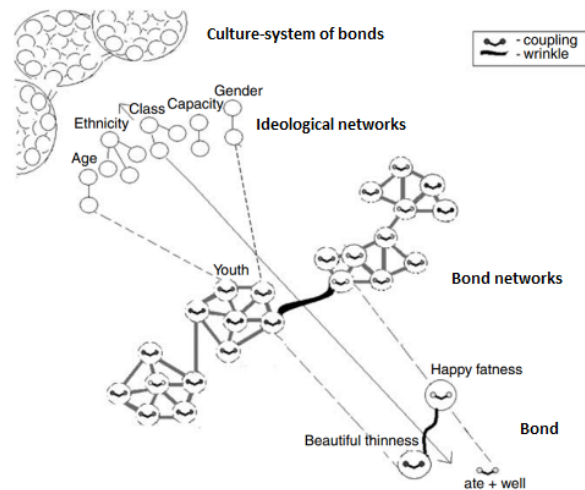

Figure 2: Negotiation of bonds in affiliation (adapted from Knight 2010a: 44, 48).

Figure 2 illustrates how value bonds is developed in affiliation [24]. At the bottom of the cline is the bonds realized by couplings of ideational and interpersonal meanings in conversations or discourses. For instance, *beautiful* and *happy* display interpersonal meanings, while *thinness* and *fatness* convey ideational meanings, thus creating couplings of *beautiful thinness* and *happy fatness*. These couplings reflect the values in a student group, i.e. perceiving thinness as an embodiment of beauty and associating weight gain from holiday family meals with happiness. These values, shared by the group members, constitute the group's value bonds and shape the identity of these girls as members of the young student group. These value bonds may connect to broader networks like 'youth' and extend to ideological networks such as 'age', 'ethnicity', 'class', 'capacity', and 'gender' (see Figure 2), ultimately interfacing with the cultural bond network.

Many studies indicate that the concepts of couplings, shared values and value bonds serve as useful analytical tools for examining the identities of group members [19, 20, 24, 27, 30, 34]. Thus, these tools are employed in the subsequent qualitative analysis to explore how NMES negotiate their identities in interviews.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 The Topic Distribution

In total, 33 topics were identified across all discourses. The seven topics that appeared in three interviews were presented in Table 2: industry characteristics, working hours, work deficiencies, personal growth, joy of life, stress, and habit improvement. As stated earlier, a coupling that is acknowledged and collectively embraced by group members evolves into a shared value, thereby establishing the value bond that defines the group identity. Informants expressed divergent opinions

regarding four specific topics: work hours, joys of life, stress, and habit improvement. Consequently, it was not possible to distill shared couplings from these topics. On the other hand, informants exhibited convergence in their perspectives on three additional topics—industry characteristics, work deficiencies, and personal growth. Hence, a more in-depth analysis of these topics was conducted, focusing on their sub-categories to identify shared couplings and the formation of value bonds.

Table 2: Main topics in the interviews with NMES.

	Topics	Frequency	Percentage(n=3)	Shared values
1	Industry characteristics	3	100%	√
2	Work hours	3	100%	
3	Work deficiencies	3	100%	√
4	Personal growth	3	100%	√
5	Joy of life	3	100%	
6	Stress	3	100%	
7	Habit improvement	3	100%	

*In Table 2, 'n' refers to the overall count of informants who were interviewed.

4.2 Industry Characteristics

After meticulously examining the discourses multiple times, four primary traits of the new media sector have been identified and recapitulated in Table 3: low barrier to entry, intense competition, high staff turnover, and large youth population. Three interviewees generally concurred that the entry barrier to the new media industry was not high. For instance, skills such as filming and editing could be readily acquired by novice practitioners, enabling them to quickly assume positions within the field. Therefore, should an employee resigned, their position would be rapidly filled by another candidate.

Accordingly, a significant influx of individuals, particularly those from the post-1990s and post-2000s generations, entered the industry. This exacerbated internal competition among new media practitioners. In addition to the pressures faced by employees, new media companies are confronted with a fiercely competitive market environment. Companies compete for a limited market share through various strategies, resulting in declining profits and intensified competition. The industry has already become 'a red ocean', leaving little room for new entrants to survive. In such a market, companies must constantly innovate to stay competitive. The intense competition accelerated the turnover rate within the sector. For instance, informant 3 expressed concern regarding their current status. He noted that, being in his twenties, he was relatively young. However, if he continued to occupy the same position in his thirties, he would be at risk of obsolescence and potential displacement, which would induce considerable anxiety.

Considering the analysis presented, these industry characteristics can be reformulated as the following couplings: [attitude: low/ideation: barrier to entry], [attitude: large /ideation: youth population], [attitude: intense/ideation: competition], and [attitude: high/ideation: staff turnover]. The couplings are interconnected because a low barrier to entry attracts a large surge of young people, leading to intense competition and high staff turnover. These couplings are shared among all informants, thus forming the value bonds that define informants' identities as NMES.

Table 3: The sub-topics of industry characteristics.

Sub-topics	Examples from informants' discourses
Low barrier to entry	The barrier to entry is actually not very high. No matter what you study, you can easily get started with this. (Informant 3-1)
Large youth population	I think the new media industry is full of young people, like us, born in the 90s and 00s. (Informant 1-2)
Intense competition	This industry is very competitive now. If you don't do it, there are plenty of others who will. There's no choice... If you don't want to do it, you can just leave, and someone else will step in to take your place. (Informant 2-1)
High staff turnover	This industry isn't that stable, you know, the turnover rate in companies is very high. (Informant 1-1)

4.3 Work Deficiency

Monotonous work is the principal work deficiency for all informants, as illustrated in Table 4. According to Table 1, three NMES had more than three years of work experience, and they all expressed dissatisfaction with the tedium of repetitive work. For example, interviewee 1 feels that the producer's job is both easy and uninteresting, and interviewee 2 finds editing work to be monotonous. Interviewee 3 mentions that the high repetitiveness of camera work can easily make people feel bored. As their working years progressed, the monotony of work led to burnout, and could hardly offer them further personal growth or long-term promotion opportunities. As a result, at the time of the interview, two of the informants were contemplating a job change. As previously noted, these young professionals are confronted with intense competition within their industry, a factor that is both a defining characteristic of the sector and a primary deficiency in their work environment.

Both work-related drawbacks can be encapsulated by the following coupling: [attitude: monotonous/ideation: work] and [attitude: intense/ideation: competition]. This coupling is shared by three informants and contributes to the formation of the identity bond among NMES.

Table 4: The sub-topic of work deficiencies.

Sub-topics	Examples from informants' discourses
Monotonous work	After doing this job for a while, I feel like it can get pretty boring. Honestly, every day you just turn on the computer, write scripts, shoot, shoot, shoot, it just feels kind of boring. (Informant 2-2)
Intense competition	This industry is very competitive now. If you don't do it, there are plenty of others who will. There's no choice... If you don't want to do it, you can just leave, and someone else will step in to take your place. (Informant 2-1)

4.4 Personal Growth

Two primary sub-topics of personal growth were coded and summarized in Table 5: enhanced capacity and strong desire for growth. Interviewee 2 was appointed to the position of project leader last year. He reports a significant improvement in his competencies, particularly in the areas of team task allocation, interpersonal communication, and client project coordination. However, informant 1 and informant 3 both indicated that they achieved no significant gains over the years in their

employment. They perceived their work as easy yet tedious, without opportunities for personal development. Interviewee 1 explicitly expressed a strong desire for personal growth, stating that she was willing to undertake more demanding work as long as it provided opportunities for learning.

The informants have a strong desire for personal growth. However, as previously mentioned in Section 4.3, the monotony of repetitive work offers little opportunity for further development, and hinders their personal growth. Although some of them have considered changing jobs, as informant 2 pointed out, their lack of expertise in other fields makes it difficult for them to transition. These young professionals seem to be trapped in iterative work, with no clear solution to their predicament in sight.

The two sub-topics highlight the high value young NMES place on personal development, which can be summarized through the following couplings: [attitude: enhanced/ideation: capacity] and [attitude: strong/ideation: desire for growth]. Both value bonds, as recognized by the couplings, inform the informants' identity as NMES.

Table 5: The sub-topics of personal growth.

Sub-topics	Examples from informants' discourses
Enhanced capacity	A lot of skills, like managing tasks at work, organizing team assignments, or handling interpersonal communication... it feels like I've gone from zero to one. Even though I might not have done everything perfectly, I personally feel that taking that first step was a good move. (Informant 2-4)
Strong desire for growth	And honestly, even if the workload is heavy, or if I'm really tired from working Monday to Friday, I think it's okay as long as I'm learning something or gaining more knowledge. (Informant 1-3)

5. Discussion

5.1 Occupational Identity Construction and Affiliation

As is demonstrated in the above data analysis, informants from different genders and companies utilize similar couplings to establish value bonds. The seven bonds are intertwined through multiple relationships, forming an identity network of NMES, as shown in Figure 3.
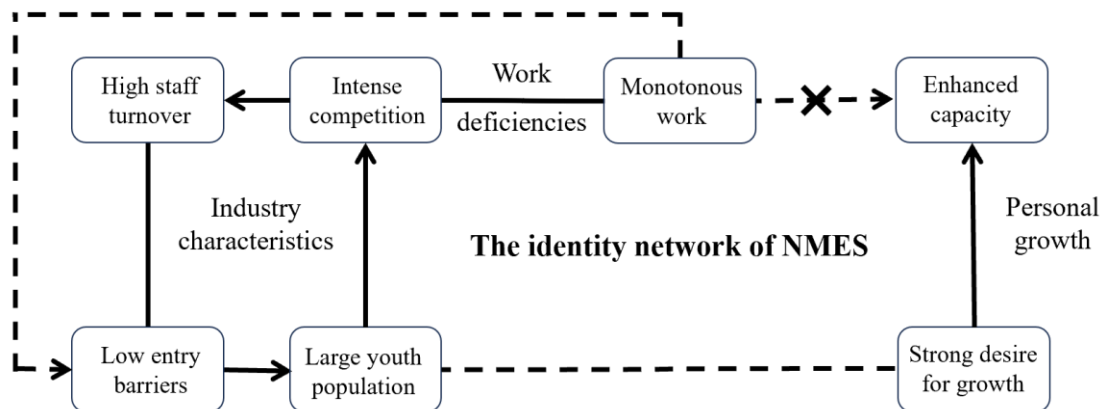

Figure 3: The identity network of NMES.

In Figure 3, the three main topics−'industry characteristics', 'work deficiencies', and 'personal growth'−are positioned close to their respective key value bonds. Additionally, the interconnections among these value bonds are depicted using five distinct line styles: solid lines, arrowed solid lines, dashed lines, arrowed dashed lines, and arrowed dashed lines with a cross mark. Specifically, the

solid line represents a direct relationship between *monotonous work* and *intense competition*, both of which are key value bonds under the topic of work deficiency. It also demonstrates a direct connection between *high staff turnover* and *low entry barriers*, both of which are primary value bonds under the topic of industry characteristics. Arrowed solid lines indicate causal relationships among value bonds within the same topic. For example, the *low entry barriers* characteristic of the new media industry lead to an influx of *a large youth population*, resulting in *intense competition* and, consequently, *high staff turnover*. These four value bonds all fall under the topic of industry characteristics. *Strong desire for growth* and *enhanced capacity* belong to the topic of personal growth, and *strong desire for growth* facilitates *enhanced capacity*. Dashed lines indicate subtle correlations among value bonds from different topics. For instance, *large youth population* and *strong desire for growth* are subtly correlated with the youth people, even though they belong to different topics. Arrowed dashed lines demonstrate subtle causal relationships among value bonds from different topics. For example, *monotonous work* leads to *high staff turnover*, though they belong to different topics. Finally, arrowed dashed lines with a cross mark between *monotonous work* and *enhanced capacity* signify a negative causal correlation, implying that work-related monotony may hinder capability improvements.

As Figure 3 displays, the bond interrelationships represented by different lines highlight that the *monotonous work* in the new media industry are the fundamental cause of the industry characteristics, including *a low entry barrier*, *a large youth population*, *intense competition* and *high staff turnover*. Simultaneously, *monotonous work* impairs capacity improvements, which the young NMES put high value on. This finding challenges the typical impression of the new media industry. Although the new media industry is widely recognized for its creativity, many NMES are required to perform repetitive tasks, especially those in the early stages of their careers. In the long run, NMPs must try hard to break free from repetitive tasks and seize opportunities to enhance their capabilities. Failure to do so effectively could lead to their displacement due to the intense competition within the industry, potentially jeopardizing their identities as NMES.

The existing literature primarily focuses on the role of shared values in fostering affiliation among group members, but few studies explore the interrelations among value bonds. The findings of the present study deepen the comprehension of the interconnections among various bonds within the identity bond network, as previously examined by Knight [24-26]. Besides, interviewees provided their responses in isolation, devoid of communication before or during the interview process. Nonetheless, the research uncovers an inherent agreement on the part of the interviewees concerning shared values, which plays a pivotal role in shaping their identities as NMES. This discovery is consistent with Zappavigna and her associates' research on 'ambient affiliation' [28, 29, 31-34], which explains how individuals can form virtual communities on social platforms through shared values, even in the absence of direct interaction. Moreover, this study confirms the efficacy of couplings, shared values, and value bonds as analytical instruments for investigating NMES identity development in discourse, and thus expands the ambit of the affiliation framework by including NMES as a focus [19-21, 24-26, 37].

6. Conclusion

The present study employs the affiliation framework of SFL to qualitatively explore how informants affiliate with the identity of being NMES in China through shared values, or how they construct their NMES identity through axiological affiliation. The results indicate that the young NMES unconsciously align themselves with seven value bonds realized by attitude-ideation couplings derived from topics of industry characteristics, personal growth and work deficiencies, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The findings challenge the prevalent assumption that the new media sector is inherently innovative and creative, as they reveal that monotonous work has become a defining characteristic for young NMES. Jobs characterized by monotony typically feature low entry barriers, which leads to an influx of the youth population, and causes significant challenges such as heightened competition and high staff turnover within the industry for NMES. Furthermore, despite young practitioners' strong desire for growth, the tedium of their work impedes their capacity development, thereby preventing personal growth. Although this is probably tied to the fact that they are in the early stages of their careers, these young, early-career practitioners must break free from repetitive tasks and enhance their skills to remain competitive and safeguard their professional identities.

In summary, this study broadens the scope of research on the identity construction of NMPs by incorporating an analysis of NMES. Additionally, the research expands the utility of the affiliation framework and offers a deeper comprehension of the intricate relationships within the identity network's bond structure. Furthermore, this study provides researchers and policymakers with enhanced insights into impediments faced by NMES in identity development, thereby empowering policymakers to guide NMES towards assuming a more proactive role in socio-economic progress. Subsequent research may delve into the discursive identity construction of new media entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing the comprehensive understanding of identity formation across the NMPs spectrum. Besides, more studies could focus on the bond relationships within identity networks.

Acknowledgement

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