

# Education and Consumerism: A Psychological View on the Problems of Higher Education in Russia

I Y Makhova<sup>1</sup>, M Y Makhova<sup>2</sup>, V A Shmakova<sup>1</sup>, Yu V Kuzmina<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>FSBEI HE Amur Humanitarian Pedagogical State University, 17/2 Kirova St., 681000, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russian Federation

<sup>2</sup>FSBEI HE Far Eastern State Transport University (FESTU), 47 Serysheva St., 680000, Khabarovsk, Russian Federation

E-mail: mail@amgpgu.ru, root@festu.khv.ru

**Abstract.** In this article, Russian higher education is considered in the context of the analysis of an 'educational service'. The authors critically analyze the negative assessment of consumerism in education that has been made in the national scientific literature. Consumerism in relation to higher education, from the point of view of the authors, is an achievement of its compliance with the exacting demands of educational service consumers and development of an active client position of the student. The authors substantiate their opinion that the devaluation of the 'service' concept in the field of education means an implicit denial of consumers' rights to actively satisfy educational needs based on their goals, intentions, desires and choice. In the course of the monitoring survey using questionnaires and statistical processing of the results, the following was determined: emergent personal characteristics, the specificity of the satisfaction of FESTU graduates (Khabarovsk) with the components of educational process and education qualification received based on the system characteristics of higher education in Russia. In the course of the analysis of the survey results, the authors are specifying the ways to solve systemic problems of higher education in Russia related to the development of a subjective position among students as consumers of educational services.

## 1. Introduction

In modern Russian philosophy of education and sociology, the problem of educational consumerism has been actively discussed [1, 2, 3]. The generally accepted definition of consumerism presented in various industry dictionaries is the following: it is an organized movement of consumers or buyers to empower and influence sellers or producers of goods, establishment of consumer societies [4]. The socially positive meaning of this phenomenon is obvious. At the same time, in the context of considering problems of higher education, both in Russia [1, 2, 3] and in the world, the concept of consumerism acquired a negative connotation [5, 6, 7]. Both domestic (M.D. Shchelkunov, E.M. Nikolaeva (2009), M.D. Napso (2019), K.K. Begalinova, M.S. Ashilova (2018), and foreign (Roger L. Geiger (2004), Reisman (1980)) authors emphasize the detrimental effect of consumerism on the functioning of higher education: development of students' habits of obtaining "digestible", easily absorbed knowledge converted into a practice of solving production problems, ignoring humanitarian (theoretical) knowledge which is regarded useless, and evaluation of studied subjects from pragmatic positions (useful - not useful). All the above leads to a decrease of academic standards, the "indulgence of professors" [1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7]. In addition, M.D. Shchelkunov and E.M. Nikolaeva assert that "personal

identification of an individual carried out according to consumption patterns in the field of education, takes the form of following symbolic pseudo values" [2]. These patterns and pseudo values, according to the authors, are manifestations of the so-called 'consumer society'.

The concept of the 'consumer society' introduced by Erich Fromm, reflects the differentiation between the two purposes of human existence ('to have or to be'), the substitution of true 'being' by surrogates of immortality - fame and inherited property while true desires, interests of people and their own will are replaced by standards of thoughts, feelings and consumption imposed by the society [8].

Rehabilitating the concept of 'consumption', we note that it means nothing else but the satisfaction of needs and the manifestation of the natural activity of the subject. The subtle differentiation between these purposes of life ('possession' versus 'being') is complicated by the fact that the source of both ways of existence is always a need that is expressed as a human need. The need for possession is focused on the external criteria of satisfaction assessment (external self-concept of the subject, his focus on social integration), the need for 'being' reflects the internal self-concept and internalization of social goals by the subject turning them into a system of his own goals and values [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. According to concepts of A. Maslow (1954) and Nancy H. Leonard, Laura L. Beauvais, Richard W. Scholl (1999), these needs are hierarchical and genetically interrelated: the condition for generation of 'being' needs is the satisfaction of 'having' ones [13, 14].

Consideration of educational problems in general and higher education in particular in the context of consumerism and 'consumption', is inevitably interconnected with the analysis of the concept 'service' or 'educational service' which is always of a judgmental and ethical nature. As a rule, the controversy is carried out with a virtual opponent since there is an implicit opinion generally accepted by Russian authors that "education is not a service" [1, 2, 3]. The alternatives that are proposed in this case are "education is a devotion," "education is the right and duty of every citizen", in our opinion, exist in the same semantic field as 'duty', 'necessity' and reflect an autocratic approach in interpretation of education. At the same time, the term 'service' in the legal field denotes a certain type of relationship between people with the source being a need, and the result being its satisfaction [15, 16]. The devaluation of the 'service' concept in the educational context reflects ignoring clients' needs, that are of the students', refusing the ability of initiators of these legal relations to experience and actively express the desire for spiritual and personal growth, as well as for acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The only rehabilitation of the 'service' concept in the educational context we found, is in the works of V. Ilyin [17] which views it as a discourse, the communicative act of interaction between an individual consumer and a manufacturer based on the idea of Jean Baudrillard: "Consumption, to the extent that this word in general makes sense, is the activity of systematic manipulation of signs " [18: 213]. Ilyin introduces the concept of 'spiritual consumerism' respectively focused on the right to satisfy spiritual needs [17].

Let's clarify that for students of higher education in Russia, realization of their client position (as users of educational services) is almost impossible since it is realizable only under conditions of continuous personal educational decision making (in the form of on-going choice and individual education planning) [19, 20]. A lack of actual choice in the learning process at a Russian university, as shown in the study by I.Yu. Makhova and O.D. Starodubets, leads to a diffuse type of professional identity prevailing among domestic students which is a problematic authenticity [21]. Social authenticity is an ability of an individual to abandon situational adherence to social roles allowing to manifest genuine, unique to a given personality emotions, thoughts and behavior [14]. The terms very close to the word 'authenticity' are: congruence, freedom, self-actualization, selfhood and self-integrity [14]. They appear in almost any fundamental work affecting the notion of a person's personality, choice, values and meanings.

Individuals learn attitudes and behaviors that are congruent to their personal value system which undoubtedly should be represented in the society. The concept of 'service' clearly differentiates the positions of the participants in the interaction as "active - reactive". The criteria of "active-passive", as well as "freedom-subordinacy" are applicable to the assessment of the educational environment [22] and therefore, to the nature of the educational service offered. The analysis of positions of teachers and

students in Russian universities, as well as learning conditions, allows us to state that the subordinate position of students (when choosing a field of study, there is no possibility to influence the content of education) and their passivity in the educational process prevails (standard rather than individual content of education does not contribute to the manifestation of activity in organization of their educational process). V.A. Yasvin defines this type of educational environment as dogmatic and considers it unsafe for students [22].

The imposition and active promotion of the product (need generation) in a democratic society is permissible, and has long been the engine of industrial progress. However, such activity of the manufacturer is compensated by selectivity and a free choice by the consumer during the evaluation of the product being offered. The right to receive a quality education shall comply with the traditional criteria of a service quality evaluation such as: the right for information, the right to be heard, the right to choose, the right for safety. Therefore, behind the question if educational services belong to the service market, there is a condescending position of educational services' providers that refuse admitting the maturity of consumer attitudes, and based on that limit their consumer rights.

Market-based approach in relation to Russian education is discussed in some works by both foreign and national authors (S.V. Barabanova (2007), M.V. Boguslavskiy, D.A. Endovitskiy (2013), Simon Marginson (2014), E.V. Neborskiy (2017)). However, they consider the global market as consumers of Russian education. Those authors name the development of digital educational environment [23] and online education courses [24] to be the main goals to increase competitiveness of Russian universities.

However, the achievement of competitiveness of domestic education, both in the Russian market and within the global world space, is possible under the condition that a customer-oriented system is to be developed assuming active participation of students in the organization of their education (decision making and choice).

The real experience of a need is possible only in a situation of choice. The prevailing forms of students participation manifestation in the educational process of domestic universities (truancy, a desire to get a credit or pass an exam, and pass tests or complete courseworks by any means), which most authors refer to as manifestation of consumerism in education, in our opinion, is a consequence of systemic organization of domestic education [20]. Rejection of imposed services is a natural need of any person. Corruption in education (a phenomenon that is common in Russia only, associated with the "purchase" of graduation theses and courseworks, or credits and exams) reflects the desire of students not to meet their teachers in the classroom, the rejection of "obsessive" customer service, "persistent" requirements in the no freedom of choice situation. Consequently, corruption in education can be explained precisely within the framework of psychology, and forecasts to tackle corruption are encouraging if only some systemic changes would occur focused on the provision of educational services in the free market space. Attempts to solve the problem of corruption of domestic education in the framework of the legal field are untenable [25].

## **2. Research methodology**

The purpose of our research was to identify the client position characteristics and satisfaction of graduate students with the quality of educational services at FESTU. The following hypothesis was tested: assessment of personal satisfaction with the educational service reveals the level of consumer activity of students as subjects of the educational process.

The research was organized as a monitoring survey of customer satisfaction (for graduates) with the quality of educational services provided by the Transport University (FESTU) in the city of Khabarovsk. Research cuts are conducted annually. Our article discusses the results of the monitoring of 2018 in comparison with 2017. The sample was formed by the involvement of existing groups. The questionnaire procedure is organized as recommended and necessary for students to obtain education qualification documents (diplomas). The sample included 1,933 graduates from FESTU 2018, which is 56% of their total number for all institutes of the head university and branches of FESTU. In the 2018 survey, extramural graduates did not take part. The questionnaire contained 27 questions, 5 of which suggested open-ended options in addition to choose from possible answers, and 2 – multiple-

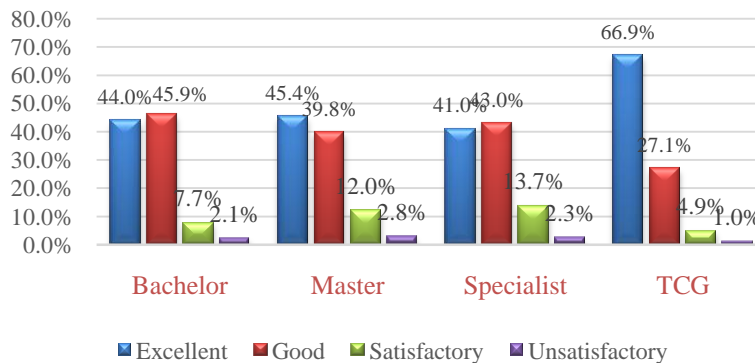
choice questions. The data were processed and analyzed by four parameters (overall assessment of the quality of the educational process, satisfaction with the organization of undergraduate training, satisfaction with the organization of graduation thesis (qualification graduation project) defense, satisfaction with the employment process) in the context of the qualification degrees of education received by clients (Bachelor, Master, Specialist, Technical College graduate) and respective majors.

The survey procedure was held in specially designated classrooms under the supervision and with the support of the organizers (quality and standardization management staff), who answered questions, listened to the opinions of the respondents regarding the procedure, meaning and purpose of the survey, motivated them to objectively, honestly express their own opinions giving answers to the questionnaire. Statistical processing of the results was carried out using correlation analysis (R. Spearman) presented in the Statistic 10.0 software package.

**3. Research results and discussion**

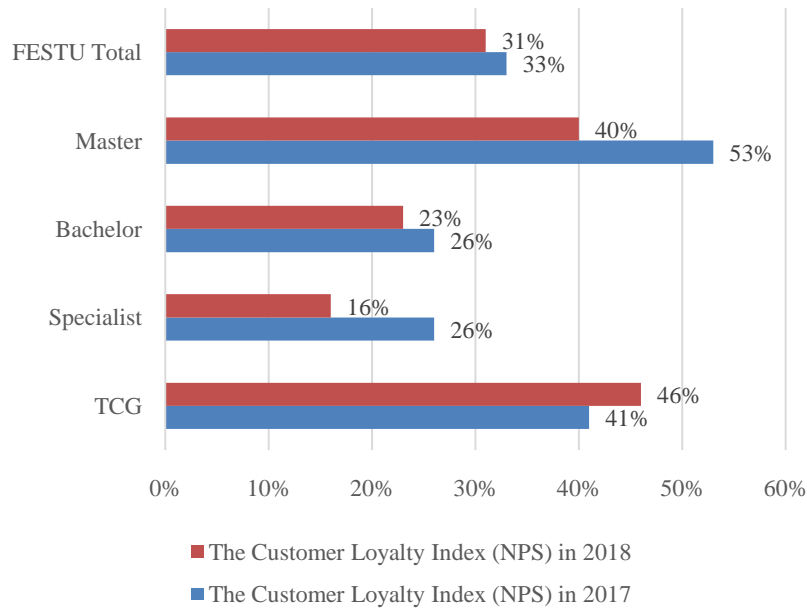
We evaluated the graduates’ consumer attitudes in the context of the realization of their basic rights (the right to safety, the right to information, the right to choose, the right to be heard) on the basis of the respondents' answers to the questions, most of which were taken from the accreditation commission documents package for educational institutions in the Russian Federation.

The satisfaction of FESTU graduates was revealed by the assessment of the quality of the educational service. Respondents had to assess the quality of education at FESTU using a 4-point scale (‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘unsatisfactory’). The results of those evaluations are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Evaluation of the quality of educational services by FESTU graduates.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the degree of satisfaction of the respondents of all groups participating in the monitoring survey is very high. Excellent and good evaluations of the quality of education at FESTU prevail.



**Figure 2.** Dynamics of consumer loyalty of FESTU graduates of 2017-2018 by education qualification.

In order to identify consumer loyalty of the survey participants, the question “What is the probability that you would recommend FESTU for applying?” was used. The answer to the question assumed a rating from 0 to 10 points. Depending on the selected point, each respondent was assigned the following status: ‘promoters’ (from 9 to 10 points); ‘passives’ (from 7 to 8 points) and ‘detractors’ (from 0 to 6 points). The customer loyalty index - Net Promoter Score (NPS) was calculated as the difference (balance) between the quantity (percentage) of ‘promoters’ to the total number of customers surveyed and the quantity (percentage) of ‘detractors’. The average NPS is 5-10%.

Consumer loyalty of overall University graduates remains high, but compared to 2017, it has slightly decreased. The downward trend has affected all education qualifications with the exception of technical college degrees. The fact of increasing consumers loyalty of educational services in the field of technical college education gives hope that technical colleges graduates participating in the survey will join the ranks of students themselves or recommend FESTU for applying to their friends.

The key issue was the question of whether graduates had a real opportunity to influence the content and pace of their education which was not at all inherent in the education system they studied (as opposed to the Bologna system). In fact, this issue contains a provocation of consumers to the manifestation of authenticity, the consistency of their assessments with external and internal reality. Thus, the extent of their tolerance, self-denial, the ability to ignore or forgive the provider his provoking actions was revealed. Based on these characteristics, we determined the social authenticity of graduates.

**Table 1.** Authenticity of graduates (in %) by different education qualifications.

Education qualification	Graduate authenticity (in survey answers about any opportunity to choose an education module (subject))		
	Any choice (1 b)	No choice (2 b)	I don't know (3 b)
Bachelor	71	20	9
Master	65	30	6
Specialist	67	25	8
Technical College	76	18	7

In general, the aggregate FESTU consumer has demonstrated problematic social authenticity corresponding to the “dogmatic educational environment”. This conclusion was made based on the assessment of the educational environment of the existing FESTU educational technology according to the criteria of V.A. of Yasvin [22] which is based on a coordinate system with the following axes: “freedom—subordinacy” (we state the inequality of the positions of educational process parties and, accordingly, subordination of students in the educational process) and “active — passive” (the standard, not individual content of education and, consequently, the participants of the educational process are passive).

The dogmatic educational environment is evaluated by experts [22] as unsafe for learners since it results in development of subordinated, passive, “studious and helpless” graduates or, as mentioned before, “socially immature” consumers who need active patronage for employment.

More than 70% of FESTU graduates has demonstrated a “convenient for the supplier” position renouncing their own and demonstrating problematic social authenticity (social timidity, inability to express their own opinion, self-ignorance, focusing on other people's opinion, gullibility, consumer naivety). It is the problematic authenticity, as is known, that reflects the position of “having” and not “being” characteristic of a ‘consumer society’ [8] being controlled by the opinion of others and common standards. Note that for a person finding authenticity is discovering his True Self. Authentic is a mentally healthy person, as opposed to a socially timid one; inauthenticity is always a result of negative impacts on mental health and social adaptation of the individual. Trusting your vibes, the ability to listen and motivate yourself even in the discouraging environment are personal features that are the grounds for the professionalism in general and leadership in particular, the elements that constitute a mature client. (These are targeted concepts that we incorporated into our program documents).

One of the hypotheses of the study was an assumption that the most authentic graduates cannot demonstrate loyalty to the provider of non-customer-oriented educational services (there is no possibility to influence the content of education (no choice)). For the purposes of testing the hypothesis, a correlation analysis (R. Spearman) of authenticity and consumer loyalty was carried out. To allow for that, we assigned numerical values to the ‘authenticity’ parameter.

Authenticity was measured against the ‘choice’ scale: the choice was recorded in points: 1 point - choice was given (no authenticity), 2 points - no choice was given (opposition to provocations prevails), 3 points – don’t know answers (a reflexive position, i.e. taking into consideration interests of the provider, however, the respondent is not ready to neglect his own interests).

Loyalty assessment was measured on a 10-point scale in response to the question “Are you ready to recommend FESTU for applying to current applicants?”

**Table 2.** The ratio of authenticity of graduates to loyalty to the university.

Education qualification	Correlation factors between readiness to recommend FESTU and the availability of choice *
Bachelor	- 0.248
Master	- 0.264
Specialist	- 0.301
Technical College	- 0.295

\* All factors are significant at 0.01.

Throughout the selection, a negative correlation was found between authenticity of graduates and their loyalty to the university at the 99% level of significance which indicates disloyalty to the provocative provider of educational services by mentally healthy graduates, unlike their socially timid peers. Thus, the most authentic customers are able to assess the quality of services provided and, therefore, demonstrate a more mature client position.

Actual manifestation of the consumer position by graduates is their starting resources. By consumers’ “starting resources” we understand a total number of opportunities that an applicant has at the

time of making a decision to apply to a university (the level of his academic achievements, the availability of patronage from a potential employer, financial support sufficient to implement his professional socialization plans). The starting resources rate was analyzed on the ‘learning conditions’ scale in the following points:

1 point – targeted referral (as a rule, opportunities are subject to market constraints, high academic achievements are not required due to no need to participate in the general competitive selection, the applicant’s own financial participation is not required),

2 points - government-subsidized students (they have enough academic achievements for the successful participation in the general enrollment competition, the applicant’s own financial participation is not required),

3 points – self-pay consumers of educational services (take part in the general enrollment competition, have sufficient educational achievements and financial resources relevant to the goals of their professional socialization).

The ratio of starting resources to university graduate authenticity is presented in Table 3.

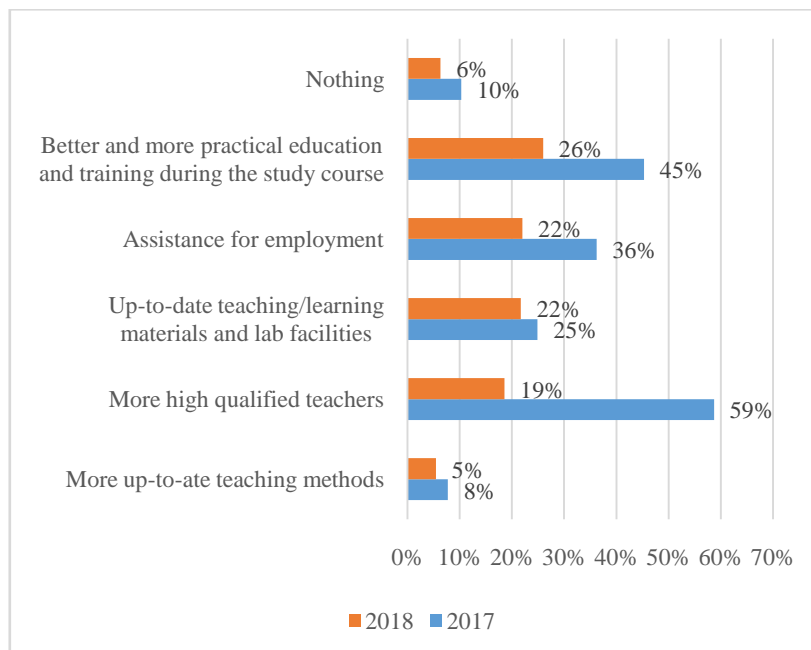
**Table 3.** The ratio of starting resources to university graduate authenticity.

Education qualification	Correlation factors between the availability of choice and learning conditions
Bachelor	0.225**
Master	0.225*
Specialist	0.198**
Technical College	- 0.050

\* Significance at 0.05

\*\* Significance at 0.01

For the majority of respondent groups (with the exception to technical college graduates), a positive correlation between applicants’ starting opportunities and their authenticity was found. In other words, the maturity of the client position is supported by intellectual and financial resources.

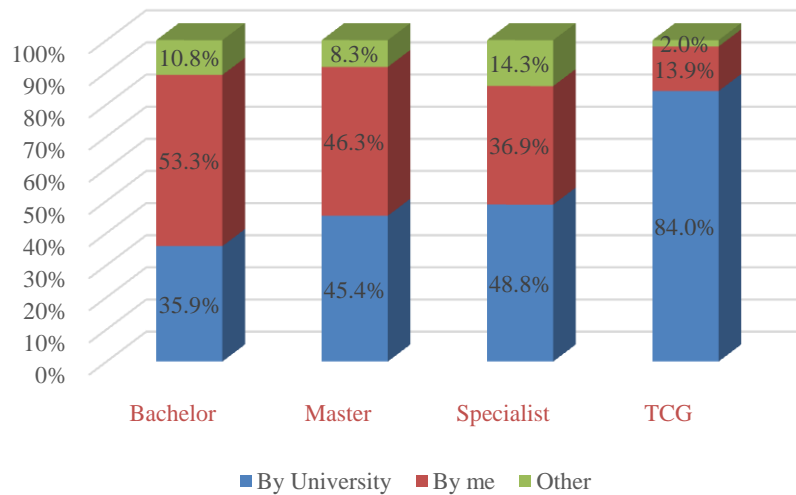


**Figure 3.** Recommendations of respondents to improve the quality of educational services in FESTU.

Answers to the question about recommendations for improving the quality of educational services in FESTU are of some interest. The results are presented in Figure 3.

In general, graduates expect more practical focus of education, better teaching and methodological support from FESTU, and believe that the educational service provider should share with them the responsibility for their employment in accordance with obtained specialties and qualifications.

In this regard, let us consider the results of the survey about organization and locations of practical training at the university (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Answers of respondents to the question “How is practical training or internship organized? Are locations for training determined by the university?”

As revealed by the monitoring survey, the provider has managed to convince consumers that they are not willing to be involved in managing the content and organization of the practical training (Figure 4), and has shifted the sole responsibility for such training onto hosting companies being under the illusion that they should be interested and diligent, as well as other details summarized as ‘Human Factor’ (without building any connections with manufacturers that can guarantee achievement of a targeted goal).

All above tells about a lack of the unified, standard approach for organization of practical training relevant to the goals and strategy of the University which are declared in its program documents as a commitment to “build and develop links with product manufacturers” “to ensure the quality of professional qualification of students to be competitive at the labor market”.

#### 4. Conclusions

To summarize it all, our monitoring survey of consumer satisfaction of educational services of the domestic university revealed the predominance of immature clients being loyal to the careless provider of educational services. This fact falls within the characteristics of educational consumerism. Graduates have demonstrated problematic authenticity, immature consumer attitudes, the need for employment patronage. However, consumer attitudes of subjects along with other spiritual goals and values are the results of education. The notorious social immaturity is a product of the educational system which is based on the technocratic principle of unequal parties of the educational process, when the student is subordinated to the teacher based of his experience, expertise, tools, etc. The mature client position identified during the study is connected with starting resources and ensures an adequate assessment of the quality of educational services. Thus, consumerism in the domestic educational practice is an optimistic future of Russian education if only some systemic changes would occur with the focus towards a free market. At present, as practice and the results of our research show, education is



totalitarian, autocratic, not-client oriented and unable for a mature client position to develop. Manifestations of the immature client are emergent features of the higher education system in Russia.

A diligent provider of educational services shall not only guarantee consumers the observance of their legal rights, but also create conditions for responsible and active obtaining of qualification skills declared by the provider including those of socially mature consumers of educational services, subjects of their own professional socialization having a clear plan of building their own professional careers.

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