

Consumer Behavior of Chinese Female on Boys' Love Fiction: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

As one of the popular consumption objects of young females in China currently, Boys' Love Fiction (BL) is a text independently created by young women and it is a cultural consumption form that describes the emotional relationship and sexual relationship between men and men. This paper explores the internal logic and characteristics of female consumption behavior in Boys' Love Fiction and how these consumptions affect the target audience. Using purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, this study selects 15 young Chinese women who had the experience of reading Boys' Love Fiction, and obtained the text data through focus group interviews. The interviews is divided into two parts to examine the reading behavior of the female readers and their self-consciousness of some issues about Boys' Love Fiction. The results show that contemporary women's consumption of Boys' Love Fiction does reflect women's pursuit of autonomy and self-reliance to a certain extent, but the values of patriarchal culture still dominate it. At the same time, under the erosion of consumerism, this kind of cultural consumption with resistance has gradually become an accessory of capital, forcing marginalized women and LGBTQ to join the carnival of "amusing ourselves to death" to a certain degree.

Keywords: *Boys' Love Fiction, Online Literature, Chinese Female Consumption, Feminine, Patriarchal, Male Gaze, Consumerism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "womenomics" was first coined by the Economist, a British magazine, which referred to the economic benefits that companies can derive from better understanding and utilizing the role of women in the workplace. In short, it covers both production and consumption, especially the emergence of many entrepreneurial women, which not only bring economic wealth but also expands the female economy from pure consumption to a duality of production and consumption. With the improvement of women's education level and income level in today's China, women's economic role has become increasingly prominent. According to the survey, in the past decade, the influence of Chinese women in consumption has gradually expanded from cities to towns. Nowadays, in most areas of China, women have become the mainstay of household consumption and social consumption [1]. The era of "her economy" in China has arrived.

With the improvement of people's quality of life, the consumption of cultural products occupies an

increasingly important position in today's consumer culture. With the development of "her economy" and the improvement of women's consumption status, Chinese women have an important right to speak in the cultural consumer market. From another point of view, whoever gets the "women" will get the market. In this regard, some scholars have pointed out that this phenomenon reflected the changes and trends of contemporary Chinese art, culture, economy and society, and implied the development of cultural products related to women's perspectives [2]. The term "feminine" originated in Japan is a consumerist concept, and it refers to the cultural products that emerged in Japan after World War II, targeting a segment of women specifically. After World War II, Japanese society still maintained the original gender division of labour. The division of labour between men and women is still clear. As a result, the market saw the spending power of these women trapped in domestic life and began to produce cultural products to cater to this group [3]. An industry chain has gradually formed. Some scholars have pointed out that although the feminine culture developed in Japan aims at pleasing women, it only allows women to

fill the gap of abstinence through cultural imagination and consumption, without any real sense of resistance. On the one hand, Japanese women imagine 'I am in charge of my world' in the feminine space, but they are extremely obedient and humble when dealing with real men [4]. The fragmentation behind feminine culture shows that confronting women's desires is only the beginning. If women's "imaginary desires" is finally satisfied and the driving force of reality is lacking, these cultural products will become the release of reality rather than the liberation of reality.

In today's Chinese network, online literature, as a major cultural consumer product, has highly developed communication content. The topics covered involve all aspects of human life, within which Boys' Love Fiction ("Danmei" in Chinese/BL), an essential component, has become a big hit among young female consumers in China in recent years. According to the research, the audience of Boys' Love Fiction accounts for 29% of Chinese university students, and 79.4% of them are female [5]. Among the top 200 novels on a famous reading website in China, there are 62 fictions with heterosexual sexual orientation, accounting for 31%, and 65 fictions with homosexual sexual orientation, accounting for 32.5% [6]. The term "Danmei" also comes from Japan, originally from the aestheticism literature movement in Europe. In modern Japan, the literary community hopes to use the promotion of *tanbi* ("Danmei" in Chinese, i.e., indulgence in beauty) to counter the trend of naturalistic literary, which is dedicated to exposing the ugliness of human nature. Japan has influenced the culture of Chinese Boys' Love Fiction, which is quite different from the usual sense of homosexual literature. Homosexual literature is more realistic, describing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of homosexuals in real life. Boys' Love Fiction is a kind of gay male literature created by heterosexuals with their imagination or expectation, whose main reading group is also heterosexual women. Besides, on some Chinese online literature websites, the classification of Boys' Love Fiction is defined as "pure love", which is related to its aesthetician origin. On the one hand, the term "pure love" refers to getting rid of the common pragmatic style of heterosexuality; on the other hand, it refers to the transcendence of gender - in many Boys' Love Fiction, the male protagonist does not consider himself as a gay but believes that the person he falls in love with happens to be a man. Also, in Boys' Love Fiction, the author will not emphasize the practical difficulties but focus on the emotions of two handsome males, allowing the readers to gain emotional and spiritual enjoyment from them. It can be seen that Boys' Love Fiction nowadays represents a vital cultural phenomenon. It is necessary to know how females, marginalized and symbolized in society, reflect their perspective and logic behind the consumption and production of this culture. A number of scholars have

discussed "women's enthusiasm for reading Boys' Love Fiction". Early research on young women's Boys' Love fiction mainly focused on the ethical issues such as popularization, vulgarization, and underage consumption of Boys' Love Fiction, and it was more about judging their own position than explaining the problems. For example, Tian Xu argued that female's addiction to homosexual literature somehow reflected the degradation of social values [7]. Ge Zhiyuan focused on the eroticism and under-ageing of Boys' Love Fiction [8]. All these studies show the contradiction that the consumption of Boys' Love Fiction was the object of criticism in early studies but failed to explain the logic behind it more deeply. In recent years, a number of scholars have used the theory of "gaze" to explain Boys' Love Fiction. The "male gaze" and "female being gazed" proposed by Laura Mulvey have undergone a historical reversal, and women are no longer a part of "be gazed". Instead of being the subject of viewing, imagination, and objectification in a male-centred society, women become the party of the gaze, while men become the "male sex" in the eyes of female desires [9-11]. Furthermore, a study of Chinese female slash writers demonstrates that slash fictions are ideal for LGBTQ+ identities and gender equality [12]. From these perspectives, the popularity of Boys' Love Fictions seems to be "revolutionary". However, as one of the most important products of today's consumer culture, Boys' Love Fiction is rarely discussed sociologically with consumerism theory, which requires explanation and reflection. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the inner logic and characteristics of female consumption behaviour in Boys' Love Fiction and the influence of this consumption on the target audience.

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods based on focus group interviews were used to collect data. Through focus group interviews, a text was produced, which reflected the consumption behavior of young Chinese women in Boys' Love Fiction, as well as their self-consciousness and perceptions of such consumption.

2.1 Research Design

To improve the understanding of participants' experiences and attitudes, this study employs a primarily qualitative strategy to facilitate the connection and communication between researchers and participants. A cross-sectional design was selected for this research, focusing on the current perspectives of the participants. More specifically, the interviewees' judgments on their own behaviours and perceptions of specific issues only applied to the time period during their interviews. Since the ultimate goal of this study was not to focus on changes in people's behaviour over time, nor to exclude detailed and extensive analysis, a

cross-sectional design is the most appropriate research method.

Focus group interviews were used for data collection. As a semi-structured interview, focus group interviews placed more emphasis on exploring the thinking and understanding of the interviewees, which enabled researchers to know more about the diverse reading behaviours of the interviewees. At the same time, focus group interviews encouraged interviewees to respond to each other's opinions so that interviewees had more control over the interview process, thus influencing each other by answering the same questions together, and the discussion led to a more comprehensive view of the issues. Some sensitive topics need to be avoided when it comes to such kind of influence, but in this study, before the start of the interview, the researcher has chosen to collect some information with even more sensitivity (e.g., reading frequency, spending budget, etc.) on a one-to-one basis, so that the formal discussions can focus on questions that may cause resonance or focus on personal attitudes rather than personal privacy.

2.2. Research Data Collection Process

2.2.1. Participants

Since the young women were the main audience of the Boys' Love Fiction, all participants were females aged 18-24 with the behaviour of reading Boys' Love [13]. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, two methods were used-purposeful sampling (through the social media communities such as Baidu Tieba and Weibo); and a snowballing process (in which researcher's friends who had a behaviour of reading Boys' Love Fictions recommended other friends with common interests). A total of 15 consumers of Boys' Love Fictions participated in this interview, all of whom indicated that they had/have a habit of reading Boys' Love Fictions, and 5 out of 15 indicated that they had also created their own products in addition to consuming Boys' Love Fictions. In the interview study, the 15 participants were divided into two groups according to the frequency and depth of their involvement in Boys' Love Fictions consumption: the first group (Group A) consists of 7 participants who consume daily or weekly and use VPNs to visit some non-popular literary websites to read Boys' Love Fictions; the second group (Group B) consists of 8 participants who consume monthly or at a lower frequency. They all read Boys' Love Fictions on popular websites and had never heard of/heard of but had not actually contacted non-popular literary websites. (Note: Due to the strict control of the content of popular online literary platforms in China, some authors create content on niche sites such as AO3 and LOFTER, which are banned from popular websites. Therefore, if they have

contact with non-popular websites, they can reflect readers' consumption depth to a certain extent.)

2.2.2. Procedure

Due to the COVID-19, both groups of interviews were conducted through online meeting software Zoom. The interviews lasted for 2 hours, and the meetings were recorded through computerized audio recording. Focus group interviews were used to evaluate the behaviour and awareness of the Boys' Love Fiction consumers. The interview was divided into two parts. The first part was a behavioural study in which the interviewer asked questions to guide the interviewees to determine their past behavioural patterns and share them with others. For example, what was the opportunity for you to come across Boys' Love Fiction? Do you usually share your reading list or experience with your partner/parents? The second part was consciousness studies, and the questions were more focused on the interviewees' own perceptions of the issues, such as: how do you think of female characters in Boys' Love Fiction? Do you think the popularity of Boys' Love Fiction promoted has LGBTQ affirmative action? Thus, the consumption logic and characteristics of this kind of cultural audience were explored through the dual research of behaviour and consciousness.

2.3. Data Analysis

Coding sheets were developed to enter the quotations on each theme made by consumers in the interview transcripts. The manuscripts after the interviews are also studied and compared in an attempt to summarize the consensus opinions of various groups and the value judgments behind them.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

First of all, in the focus group interview, because many participants participated in the research, the confirmation of agreement became a core issue in ethics. The extent of information disclosure may involve the research process. Secondly, groups were revocable, and they could withdraw. Individual withdrawal would affect the overall data. Confidentiality and anonymity issues were also prominent in focus group interviews which needed to be handled with caution. In this study, the researchers provided some background information about the interview through an information sheet and consent form before the interview explained the purpose of the focus group and illustrated some questions with examples. In addition, the information sheet guaranteed that the real name or other directly identifying information would not be reported.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. The shallow and deep logic of female Boys' Love Fiction consumption

Some scholars have expounded their views on why young women like reading Boy's Love Fiction. For example, Li Yinhe, a famous sociologist in China, believes that Boys' Love Fiction is purely for women's aesthetic needs. They like Boys' Love Fiction "more from the aesthetic point of view, more romantic things, such as talking about beautiful young boys" [14]. And Zheng Dandan added that Boys' Love Fiction was a female practice. Through creating and appreciating Boys' Love Fiction, women express their demands for pure love, autonomy and equality, which is a manifestation of the progress of contemporary women's consciousness [15]. This view has also been shared by many subsequent researchers. This study found that women's consumption of Boys' Love Fiction might have two levels of logic. On the surface layer, women's self-consciousness and internal needs can be seen more clearly through their consumption behaviour. However, at the bottom layer of this consumption behaviour, the deep imprint of patriarchal culture is still retained.

3.1.1. On the surface layer: women's demands and resistance

Firstly, women's resistance and challenge to traditional female roles are expressed by reading Boys' Love Fiction. Since Boys' Love Fiction generally reflects a utopian pursuit of pure love, the love between the protagonists is not for marriage and procreation, but a refuge for women still influenced by the traditional Chinese concepts of marriage and children in real society. At the same time, the traditional idea that men are superior to women also makes many new generations of women uncomfortable. Their addiction to Boys' Love Fiction is the product of the contradiction between their own needs and social expectations. During the interview, when the researcher asked, "Why do you consume Boys' Love Fiction?", some interviewees also mentioned similar views:

A2:I think one of the important reasons why Boys' Love Fiction is so popular is that women are born with a strong desire to pursue and yearn for beautiful things. Before the popularity of Boys' Love Fiction, the androcentrism literature was all the rage. This traditional model of strong men and weak women led to the aesthetic fatigue of most people. Then I

feel that Boys' Love Fiction is very anti-traditional, just like some people don't want to get married or have a baby. I think this may be very echoing the demands of modern readers. Although it is difficult to fulfil in real life, I hope it could become real one day.

B7: I consumed Boys' Love Fiction for the original reason of chasing the stars and later found that Boys' Love Fiction broke through the traditional concept of bondage. Since in our traditional concept, a man and a woman must be together, and then get married and have children. However, Boys' Love Fiction is different, and the same sex can also fall in love in this world. I think this feeling of breaking free from the shackles of the world and not being bound by traditional culture has brought me different surprises!

A4: I read Boys' Love Fiction because I think that most of the female protagonists in romantic fiction are full of nonsense, overly complex and indecisive in their psychological activities, and not very much in line with my expectations for women. At the same time, the status of men and women is always very disparate, which makes me feel very disgusting.

It can be seen that the traditional view of marriage makes women in today's reality feel repressed, the conventional pattern of strong men and weak women and the conventional image of women make these repressed people feel aesthetically fatigued or even rejected, and the rebellion of gay men against the world in the novel satisfies their real inner needs.

Secondly, reading Boys' Love Fiction is also a kind of rebellion against the male gaze by women. During the interviews, the author found that many of them had switched from romantic fiction to Boys' Love Fiction. Several interviewees expressed the following views.

A3: If I read something about portraying female images, it makes me feel very offensive and uncomfortable. But when I watch two men, I don't feel that way. There are times when I get a very soothing feeling when I see a plot of two handsome guys hurting each other, and I feel like maybe I'm looking for a sense of balance.

A1: I once wrote a couple of Boys' Love Fictions, and at that time, I just felt uncomfortable with the love between man and woman in traditional novels. I always unconsciously imagined myself as the heroine, and then the heroine was usually silly and dependent on the man for everything, which made me feel bored. But when I write about boys, I will not have such a burden. I can write at will.

Boys' Love Fiction lovers are tired of the traditional female images in novels. They feel offended by the "gaze" and do not want to be in the position of "gazed" all the time. They also want to be able to look at men as they gaze at women. Therefore, on the one hand, they

actively create the image of men according to their aesthetics, constructing a romance between men and making them the consumers. Even in some "one top, many bottom" texts, "men" have assumed the role of being objectified. On the other hand, they also put some women's psychological characteristics and injustice into them so that men can taste the suffering of women. However, the author believes that, although Boys' Love Fiction expresses women's independent appeal through the way of male-male pairing, on the other hand, it also reflects the patriarchal culture carried by women to a certain extent.

3.1.2. At the bottom layer: the brand of patriarchal culture

First, there are women's self-loathing and identification with men. In "Misogyny," Chizuko Ueno pointed out that "female self-loathing is a universal emotion for all women living in modern industrial society [16]." In a society where "misogyny" prevails, almost everyone has a misogynistic complex, and part of the reason why the Boys' Love Fiction may be that these female readers subconsciously hate themselves, who therefore expect to create a "gender relationship" without women's participation. Placing their desires under the shell of men seems to regard men as the objects of consumption, but in fact, it is an essential representation of women's escaping from their own feminine identity and misogyny. On this issue, the attitude of Group A is more obvious and tougher than that of Group B, as the interviewee in Group A said:

A5: I prefer some powerful personas. I do not like to see the "bottom" that is too "feminine". If the bottom layer is described as a real-world woman, it can not be seen as a Boys' Love Fiction because I am tired of reading the female characters in romance and want to see some more masculine love. At the same time, in Boys' Love Fiction, women usually appear as a kind of "vicious female in a supporting role", and women who adore the male protagonist in the story often arouse the readers' disgust and even abuse. During the interview, the interviewees also launched a profound discussion on the role of women in the Boys' Love Fiction. Some interviewees mentioned that most of the women in the Boys' Love Fiction were disliked characters (which might be labelled as derogatory) or strong women who were not married or even had multiple partners to show their independence. One of the interviewees agreed and said the current discussion reminded her of a novel that showed female characters were almost negative, but she felt justified when she read it. Another interviewee who has participated in the creation of Boys' Love Fiction holds the view that the author's similar creation is related to the vicious circle. Some female readers read Boys' Love Fiction because they are tired of romance, so they don't resent the abuse of characters similar to the

heroine of the romance being abused; The author, in order to please the readers to increase the creation of similar characters. Thus, it is not uncommon for female characters to be belittled or ignored in fictions. In addition, when the interviewees elaborated on the female characters they wanted to see in the book, the expectations presented were still limited to the value system defined by the patriarchal society, such as successful career, high income, no need to get married and have children, etc., in which the "fertility" that women are born with was regarded as a burden.

Secondly, the fiction reproduces the gender roles and the patriarchal structures in male-male relationships. In the current Chinese online Boys' Love Fiction, most authors distinguish between "top" and "bottom" in their texts. The "top" has an infiltration function in sexual behaviour, while the "bottom" has an acceptance function in sexual behaviour. Many Chinese Boys' Love fictions depict the "top" as dominant in this romantic relationship and have some social characteristics that are believed to be masculine. On the contrary, the "bottom" is usually portrayed as playing a relatively subordinate role in the relationship and having some characteristics that are considered feminine in society. This division between "top" and "bottom" is not only about the position in the sexual behaviour but also implies the gender power structure in romantic relationships.

Meanwhile, some interviewees believe that the binary division between "top" and "bottom" is a unique feature of East Asia: "I have seen a lot of Boys' Love Fiction in Europe and the United States, which basically do not make much distinction, while in China if the author does not make a distinction in the text, many readers will argue over who is the "top" or "bottom". Thus, we can see that the tacit acceptance of gender and sexuality binarisms and the remnants of patriarchy in East Asian society are implicitly reproduced in the novel. Beyond this, the fiction reverses the gender subject of gaze and is gazed at with the same structure. Laura Mulvey once argued that the classic Hollywood films were all about men's gaze and women's being gazed at, and men were the subjects of desire and action, while women were the objects of desire and men's actions [17]. In Boys' Love Fiction, women are given the power to gaze at men, yet, fictions are still portraying the male body in the same way that the female body is portrayed in traditional literature. In addition, patriarchy not only represents not only symbolic power but also capital power. The female readers are given the power of "gazing" because she exists as a consumer. When she has the ability to consume, she can consume the image of men as women. What stands out at this point is the power relationship behind the capital, and the patriarchal structure is unknowingly reproduced again.

Thirdly, although some female writers try to create a kind of women's own literature through Boys' Love Fictions, the values, experiences, and confusions presented in the novels are still challenging to be presented in the female figures. However, the content of the fiction is still submerged by patriarchal values. Similarly, female figures are still stereotyped, and female writers and readers can only express their social existence and social self by projecting their social experiences to male characters.

3.2. Characteristics of female Boys' Love Fiction consumption: "label consumption"

Apart from the imprint of male culture, the consumption resistance of "Danmei" has also been eroded by consumer culture. According to Gramsci's analysis, domination includes both the dominations of violence and culture. The establishment of cultural hegemony relies on the continuous absorption and assimilation of the dominant culture to other cultures. Through investigations interviews, it is found that under the influence of consumer culture, the consumption pattern of female audiences has changed from subculture consumption to "label" consumption, and the meaning of meaninglessness has been expanded. According to the information provided by the interviewees, the click-through rate and download rate of Boys' Love Fiction on reading sites are the key elements for most people to choose them.

However, in this case, some authors would add tags to their articles' introduction to acquire more attention. They would also define the content or characters of their articles with typical words. Some authors even deliberately write immoral content to get attention, including incest, sexual abuse and paedophilia. Boys' Love Fiction has gradually turned into a "consumer product" from a simple kind of amateur's writing. Thus, under the distortion of consumption and entertainment, the seriousness and resistance that originally belonged to the subculture are dissolved, and the misinterpretation of Boys' Love culture gradually becomes a common issue. Coupled with the impulsive and frenzied adoration and expression of teenagers, the image of Boys' Love culture is often stereotyped and demonized in people's minds. Consumer culture re-creates the Boys' Love culture resources, endows them with a new label, and promotes them as a niche popular culture on the Internet, making the spiritual resources originally produced in the "Danmei" subculture group a label and bondage for the subculture group in turn. In other words, the consumption of Boys' Love Fiction culture has become the "integration" of the subcultural group by the consumer culture.

3.3. The influence of the consumption of Boys' Love Fiction on the audience: the women and

LGBTQ groups are forced into the orgy of "amusing ourselves to death"

According to the cultural factory theory proposed by Hogheim and Adorno, the culture consumed by the public is not determined by their preferences. Instead, the culture produced by the culture factory is imposed on the public without the public's being aware of it. Under the influence of consumer culture, this situation is gradually amplified in the Boys' Love culture, which is originally a subculture. The creators label their works to get more attention. In order to make profits, commercial capital sets up literary websites, sets up different divisions for tags, encourages consumers to choose books according to the tags and make them read "more comfortably". This cultural environment has led to a more extensive understanding of LGBTQ culture among consumers, with the phenomenon of signifiers replacing signified. Interviewees discussed their views on the relationship between 'Danmei' and the LGBTQ community in the interviews.

A6: A lot of people like to see the CP (couples) in Danmei, but they just like to see two handsome guys together. As long as these two guys are good-looking, the two of them may not have an intimate relationship, just ordinary friends or colleagues, but because of their good looks, they can force them to be together. I think this is rude for those sexual minorities.

B4: I used to have a similar situation. For example, in reality, when I saw some unattractive same-sex couples, I felt a little uncomfortable.

B6: I have a friend who is an influencer. She pretended to be a lesbian and then posted some videos on TikTok to get more attention. But after she got into a relationship with another girl, she felt as if she was not actually like girls.

Homosexuality in China is not as severely persecuted and extremely hated as in the west but neglected and despised by mainstream society [18]. Such a social environment makes "gay culture" more easily alienated by consumer culture. It seems that people are more tolerant towards sexual minorities, which is actually based on the acceptance of beauty. One part of the population began to regard it as a trendy culture, while others used it to gain more wealth. Fake cp/ contract couples are popping up, creating some eye-catching behaviour to achieve the purpose of profit. The women and LGBTQ groups, which are already marginalized by society, are forced into the orgy of "amusing ourselves to death" [19]. Their resistance is gradually dissipated..

4. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, Boys' Love Fiction, as the object of cultural consumption for young women in China today,

has become a phenomenon that needs to be explained and understood in depth in Chinese society. After research and discussion, this paper found that the logic of women's consumption of Boys' Love Fiction showed women's demand and resistance to reality on the surface layer. They reflect women's demand for pure love, autonomy, equality and show certain characteristics of emancipated women by creating and enjoying Boys' Love Fiction. However, if we go deeper into the essence, misogyny still pervades the readers and authors of Boys' Love Fiction. Gender roles in the real world are reproduced in novels, the male gaze is recreated in an alternative way, and the value system of the patriarchal structure still dominates. The common values, experiences, and confusions of female authors are still difficult in the female figures. In the meanwhile, the erosion of the consumer culture on the "Danmei" culture has made the signifier replace signified, and the resistance of the culture has been gradually dissolved. Finally, the women and LGBTQ groups, who have been marginalized by society, are forced into the orgy of "amusing ourselves to death".

This study provided an opportunity to advance the understanding of Boys' Love Fiction from the perspective of femininity and consumerism. In addition, it brings a new consumerist perspective to the traditional feminist study of Boys' Love Fiction. Fusing the two perspectives reflects the process and experience of the socially marginalized and symbolizes women's struggle with patriarchal culture from multiple perspectives. In order to improve the understanding of Boys' Love Fiction, further research on it is necessary for the future. For example, whether Boys' Love Fiction can effectively express women's awakening in terms of sexual consciousness and what specific role sexual minorities play in this culture. At the same time, in the process of the rise of Boys' Love Fiction, Japanese literary concepts, the construction of gender consciousness and the aesthetic standards of gender have also entered the view of Chinese audiences. Whether these standards will confuse our mainstream culture and whether they will inappropriately affect our social construction of gender and lead to the dislocation of social structures are questions that deserve further study.

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