

Source Identity and Health Belief Model Message Features in Most-Liked Xiaohongshu "Fat Loss Meal" Notes: A Quantitative Content Analysis

Zhang Yixin*, Feroz De Costa, & Saw Teck Chew

Communication Department, Faculty of Business, Information & Human Sciences (FBIHS),
Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology (KLUST)
Corresponding Author Email: 242924775@s.klust.edu.my

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Abstract

Visual social media is an important setting for everyday dietary communication, but the sources and persuasive features of highly visible diet content remain insufficiently documented. This quantitative content analysis examined source identity and six message-level Health Belief Model (HBM) features in an archived corpus of 180 Xiaohongshu notes retrieved with the Chinese term for 'Fat Loss Meal' and ranked by likes. Influencers/bloggers accounted for 66.1% of notes, followed by ordinary users (18.9%), experts or health institutions (13.3%), and marketing/other accounts (1.7%). Cues to action were most prevalent (89.4%), followed by barrier-reduction messages (78.2% of 179 valid cases) and perceived benefits (75.0%). Susceptibility appeared in 40.0%, any severity message in 22.8%, and self-efficacy in 5.0%. Cue prevalence differed across the four source groups (two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact $p = .001$; Cramér's $V = .319$). Influencers/bloggers had the highest descriptive cue prevalence (95.0%), but none of the six exploratory pairwise contrasts remained significant after Holm correction. The results describe a popularity-ranked sample in which creator-led sources and action-enabling messages predominated. They do not establish nutritional accuracy, audience effects, or algorithmic causation.

Keyword: Cues to Action, Health Belief Model, Health Communication, Quantitative Content Analysis, Source Identity, Xiaohongshu

Introduction

Visual social media has become a routine pathway to diet and weight-management information. Images, short videos, personal narratives, and engagement signals can make dietary advice feel immediate and reproducible, particularly for younger users (Alzaben et al., 2022; Lozano-Chacón et al., 2021; Lupton, 2018). At the same time, platform visibility is not the same as professional authority or evidential quality. A creator can translate a meal plan into an attractive daily routine, while a credentialed source may communicate more cautiously and with less adaptation to platform conventions.

Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote) is a useful setting in which to study this tension. The platform combines image-text notes, short videos, searchable lifestyle topics, creator profiles, and engagement-based ranking. Content retrieved with the Chinese term for 'Fat Loss Meal' may combine recipes, shopping guidance, personal experience, appearance claims, and commercial recommendations in a single note. The visual form can communicate not only what to eat but also how feasible, desirable, or socially meaningful a dietary routine appears. Two dimensions are central to this communication environment. The first is source identity: whether a note is posted by an expert or health institution, an influencer/blogger, an ordinary user, or a marketing-oriented account. The second is message design. The Health Belief Model (HBM) distinguishes perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy (Janz & Becker, 1984; Rosenstock, 1974). In a content analysis, these constructs can be operationalised as observable message features rather than assumed audience beliefs.

This study maps source identity and six HBM message features in a popularity-ranked sample of Xiaohongshu notes. It then tests whether the prevalence of cues to action differs across all four source groups. The contribution is descriptive and relational: the study identifies who appeared in the archived most-liked results, how those notes were structured, and whether action cues were distributed unevenly. It does not assess nutritional accuracy, individual exposure, persuasion, or the causal operation of the platform's algorithm.

Literature Review

Visual Diet Communication on Social Media

Visual-platform communication reorganises health knowledge around demonstration. Images and short videos can show ingredients, preparation sequences, portions, and bodily transformations more quickly than conventional text. Platform-specific visual conventions also shape what can be made salient within a limited viewing time (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). In diet and fitness communication, this demonstrative capacity often joins health language to aspiration, appearance, discipline, and identity (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

Such communication may be useful without being complete. A concise recipe can reduce implementation effort, but compression can also remove uncertainty, contraindications, or the conditions under which general advice does not apply. Research on Chinese youths' use of fitness-related health information likewise indicates that source credibility and platform processes matter to information use (Zhang et al., 2024). It is therefore important to distinguish a note's visible communicative features from its accuracy and from any effects it may have on users.

HBM Constructs as Message Features

The HBM was developed to explain preventive health behaviour through perceived threat and the conditions that support action (Janz & Becker, 1984; Rosenstock, 1974). Perceived susceptibility concerns vulnerability to a condition, while perceived severity concerns its consequences. Perceived benefits describe expected gains from a recommended behaviour, and perceived barriers describe the costs or obstacles that may prevent action. Cues to action provide triggers or prompts, and self-efficacy concerns confidence in performing the behaviour.

When the HBM is applied to media content, these constructs should not be treated as measurements of viewers' internal states. Instead, a note can make susceptibility salient, describe physical or psychosocial severity, promise benefits, lower practical barriers, provide a concrete action cue, or express confidence that the audience can succeed. This message-centred approach supports systematic comparison while preserving the distinction between content and reception. Prior work has shown the value of connecting HBM message characteristics with creator characteristics in social-media research (Jia et al., 2024).

Visual diet notes may favour an action-enabling cluster of HBM features. Menus, ingredient lists, step-by-step demonstrations, convenient substitutions, and encouraging language can operationalise cues, barrier reduction, benefits, and self-efficacy. Susceptibility and severity instead require the message to foreground risk or consequences. Whether popularity-ranked notes emphasise one cluster more than the other is an empirical question addressed by the present analysis.

Source Identity and Platform Authority

Digital health communication brings professional and experiential authority into the same ranked space. Professional authority is signalled through credentials and institutional affiliation; experiential authority can be built through personal testimony, continuity, visible outcomes, and familiarity with platform culture (Lupton, 2018). These forms can overlap, but they provide different resources for presenting diet advice.

Influencer research shows that creator visibility, message value, and perceived credibility can shape audience responses (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Health influencers can make advice relatable and practical, but relatability does not establish accuracy, and the effects of influencer health communication can be beneficial or harmful (Powell & Pring, 2024). Expert creators face a parallel challenge: they must retain evidential safeguards while adapting to concise and personal formats (Kaňková et al., 2024).

For this reason, source identity is treated here as a manifest classification, not as a direct measure of credibility. An expert category identifies displayed professional or institutional markers; an influencer category identifies a professionalised creator identity without the specified health credentials. The analysis asks how often each category appeared and how source identity related to one observable strategy cues to action.

Research Gap and Research Questions

Recent studies show that source credibility and platform processes matter to Chinese youths' fitness-information use (Zhang et al., 2024), and that HBM appeals and information sources relate to engagement with prenatal-exercise posts on Xiaohongshu (Fang & Wang, 2025); related work has examined HBM messages and creator characteristics in vaccine tweets (Jia et al., 2024). These studies do not establish how different source groups combine all six observable HBM features in popularity-ranked dietary notes. 'Fat Loss Meal' notes are a useful case because recipes and practical demonstrations can provide concrete action cues alongside claims about benefits, barriers, and health risks, while expert, creator-led, and commercial accounts appear in the same results. This study addresses that content-level gap by documenting source distribution and HBM-feature prevalence and testing whether cues

to action vary across four source groups in an auditable sample of most-liked Xiaohongshu notes.

RQ1: What is the distribution of source identity among the sampled Xiaohongshu ‘Fat Loss Meal’ notes?

RQ2: How prevalent are the six focal HBM message features in the sampled notes?

RQ3: Is source identity associated with the presence of cues to action across the four source categories?

Methodology

Study Design and Unit of Analysis

The study used a cross-sectional quantitative content-analysis design. Quantitative content analysis requires a bounded corpus, explicit units, operational definitions, and transparent treatment of coding and missing data (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). The unit of analysis was one complete Xiaohongshu note. For image-text notes, coding covered the caption and visible text in the images. For videos, coding covered spoken audio, subtitles, and text visible within the video frames. Comment content, hashtags, and material reached through external links were excluded from coding. Public profile information was used only to classify source identity and check duplication.

The framework treated six HBM constructs as binary message features and source identity as a four-level categorical variable. Multiple HBM features could occur in the same note. Figure 1 shows the conceptual relationship examined; it represents a comparison framework rather than a causal model.

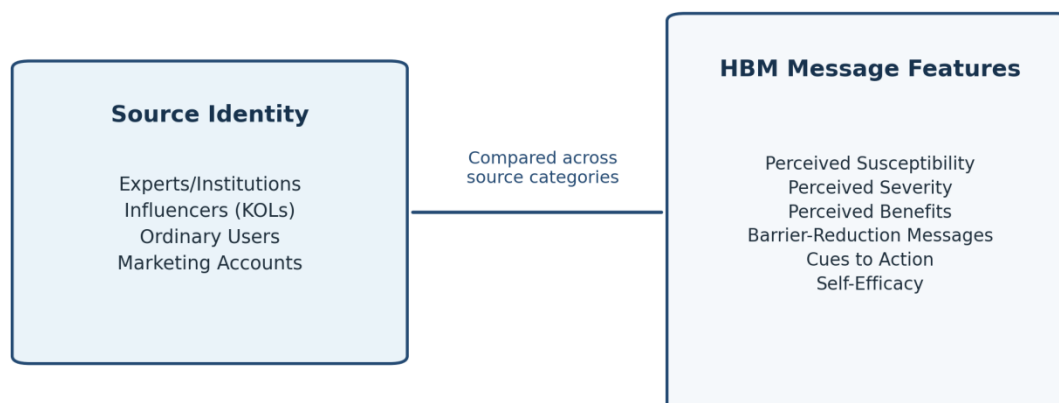


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Content Analysis

Source: Developed by the authors.

Retrieval, Screening, and Analytic Corpus

Retrieval was conducted in the Xiaohongshu mobile application in Xi'an, China, from 5 to 9 January 2026. The search was run separately on each of the five days, and candidate notes were recorded continuously. The search term was jiǎnzhī cān ('Fat Loss Meal'), and results were ordered using the platform's diǎnzàn zuìduō ('Most Liked') option. This procedure defined a purposive, popularity-ranked sample; it was not intended to represent all Xiaohongshu diet content.

The retrieval record contained 200 candidate notes. Screening excluded 20: eight duplicate notes, three notes unrelated to the study topic, and nine purely promotional advertisements without substantive diet information. The final analytic corpus therefore contained 180 notes. Marketing-oriented accounts remained eligible when the sampled note included substantive diet content rather than being a pure advertisement. The archived analytic workbooks begin with the 180 retained notes; the 20 excluded items and their row-level screening decisions are not preserved in those workbooks, so the reason-specific counts derive from the contemporaneous retrieval and screening record.

Measures and Operational Definitions

Source Identity

Source identity was coded into four mutually exclusive categories. Experts/health institutions included certified physicians, dietitians or nutritionists, official health organisations, and comparable sources displaying a relevant credential or institutional affiliation. Influencers/bloggers included fitness coaches, fat-loss creators, yoga teachers, and other vertically focused creators who presented a sustained personal brand but did not display the professional health credentials required for the expert category.

Ordinary users were non-credentialed accounts primarily sharing personal experience without a clear professional creator identity. Marketing/other accounts were sources with an evident sales orientation. Source classification relied on visible profile markers and the account's public content pattern, not on the wording of a single note alone.

HBM Message Features

Each HBM feature was coded 1 (present) or 0 (absent). Susceptibility included references to vulnerability, such as an easy-to-gain-weight body type, sedentary risk, common dietary mistakes, hidden sugar, or dietary traps. Severity was represented by two recorded subtypes. Physical severity included physiological or appearance-related consequences such as diabetes, illness, hair loss, menstrual disruption, premature ageing, glycation-related facial changes, or skin problems. Social/psychosocial severity included ridicule, appearance anxiety, reduced confidence, or difficulty with clothing. A derived 'any severity' variable was coded present when either subtype was present.

Benefits included explicit desirable outcomes such as reported weight loss, improved appearance or skin, better mood, clothing freedom, or a claimed nutritional advantage. Barrier reduction included language that made action appear simple, convenient, inexpensive, hunger-free, accessible to beginners, or compatible with readily available foods. Cues to action required a concrete prompt or tool, such as a specific menu, shopping list, follow-along video, check-in challenge, preparation sequence, or before-and-after comparison. Self-efficacy included encouragement that the viewer could succeed, role-modelling statements, or explicit assurance that the routine was suitable for a beginner.

Coding Procedure and Data Integrity

The primary researcher coded all 180 notes using the predefined framework and the explicit operational definitions described above. Independent duplicate coding was not undertaken; therefore, no inter-coder reliability coefficient is reported. The coding framework and the

data-integrity checks described below supported a consistent and auditable coding process but are not treated as substitutes for independent inter-coder reliability assessment.

The original and cleaned analytic workbooks were compared cell by cell. Both contained the same 180 analytic records. The 57 observed differences were confined to standardising one source label from the text value '2Crossover Influencer' to the numeric code 2; no HBM code differed between the files. The retained data contained no exact full-row duplicates. One barrier-reduction value was blank and was left missing rather than imputed, giving that variable a valid denominator of 179.

The descriptive and inferential results below were recalculated directly from these final row-level codes.

Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages answered RQ1 and RQ2. Percentages used the number of valid observations for each variable. The focal severity prevalence used the derived 'any severity' indicator; physical and social/psychosocial subtypes are also reported for transparency.

RQ3 was evaluated with a 4×2 source-by-cue table. Several expected cell counts were small, including the marketing/other group ($n = 3$), so the primary inferential result was a two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test rather than the Pearson chi-square approximation (Agresti, 2013). The exact p value was verified by enumerating all 724 tables with the observed margins. Cramér's V was reported as an omnibus effect-size index. Six post-hoc pairwise two-sided Fisher exact tests were exploratory, with Holm correction across the six comparisons. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$.

Results

Corpus and Source Distribution

The final corpus comprised 180 notes: 134 videos (74.4%) and 46 image-text notes (25.6%). As Table 1 shows, influencers/bloggers were the largest source group ($n = 119$, 66.1%), followed by ordinary users ($n = 34$, 18.9%), experts/health institutions ($n = 24$, 13.3%), and marketing/other accounts ($n = 3$, 1.7%). These frequencies answer RQ1 for the sampled popularity-ranked corpus.

Table 1

Distribution of Source Identity

Source Identity	n	%
Experts/Health Institutions	24	13.3
Influencers/Bloggers	119	66.1
Ordinary Users	34	18.9
Marketing/Other	3	1.7
Total	180	100.0

Source: Recalculated from the final row-level codes.

Prevalence of HBM Message Features

Cues to action were present in 161 of 180 notes (89.4%). Barrier-reduction messages were present in 140 of 179 valid cases (78.2%), and benefits in 135 of 180 (75.0%). Susceptibility appeared in 72 notes (40.0%). Physical severity appeared in 28 (15.6%) and

social/psychosocial severity in 13 (7.2%); no note contained both recorded severity subtypes, so any severity was present in 41 notes (22.8%). Self-efficacy was present in nine notes (5.0%). Table 2 and Figure 2 answer RQ2.

Table 2

Prevalence of Health Belief Model Message Features

Message Feature	Present n	Valid N	%
Perceived Susceptibility	72	180	40.0
Perceived Severity Physical	28	180	15.6
Perceived Severity Social/Psychosocial	13	180	7.2
Perceived Severity Any Subtype	41	180	22.8
Perceived Benefits	135	180	75.0
Barrier-Reduction Messages	140	179	78.2
Cues to Action	161	180	89.4
Self-Efficacy	9	180	5.0

Source: Recalculated from the final row-level codes. 'Any subtype' equals physical or social/psychosocial severity. One barrier-reduction value was missing and not imputed.

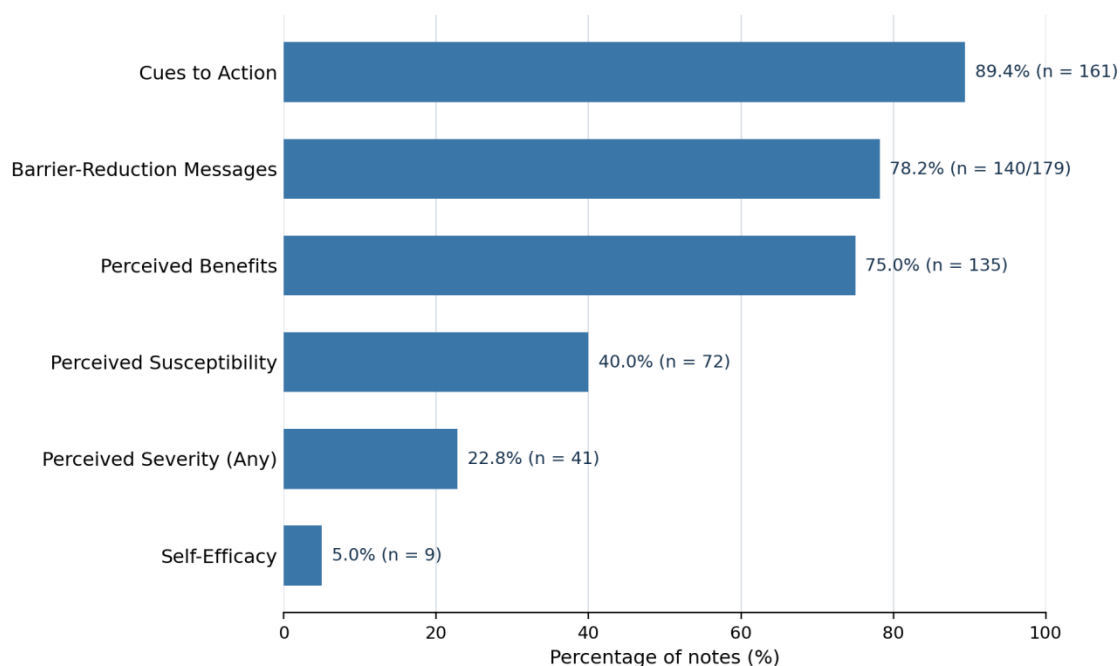


Figure 2: Prevalence of the Six Focal HBM Message Features

Source: Recalculated from the final row-level codes. N = 180 except barrier-reduction messages (valid N = 179). Severity represents either recorded subtype.

Source Identity and Cues to Action

Cue prevalence was 79.2% among experts/health institutions (19/24), 95.0% among influencers/bloggers (113/119), 82.4% among ordinary users (28/34), and 33.3% among marketing/other accounts (1/3). The two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton test indicated an association between source identity and cue presence, exact $p = .001$, with Cramér's $V = .319$. Table 3 provides the complete 4×2 table used for the test.

The six exploratory pairwise tests did not identify a significant contrast after Holm correction. For example, the descriptive difference between influencers/bloggers and experts/health institutions had an unadjusted two-sided Fisher $p = .020$ and an odds ratio of 4.96, but the Holm-adjusted p was .101. Accordingly, RQ3 is answered at the omnibus level; the data do not support a corrected pairwise claim that a specific source group differed from another.

Table 3

Source Identity by Presence of Cues to Action

Source Identity	Absent n (%)	Present n (%)	Total	% Present
Experts/Health Institutions	5 (20.8)	19 (79.2)	24	79.2
Influencers/Bloggers	6 (5.0)	113 (95.0)	119	95.0
Ordinary Users	6 (17.6)	28 (82.4)	34	82.4
Marketing/Other	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	3	33.3
Total	19 (10.6)	161 (89.4)	180	89.4

Source: Recalculated from the final row-level codes. Two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact $p = .001$; Cramér’s $V = .319$. Pairwise tests were exploratory and Holm-adjusted.

Discussion*Principal Findings*

Three findings define the sampled communication pattern. First, influencers/bloggers supplied about two thirds of the popularity-ranked corpus, although experts/health institutions, ordinary users, and a small number of marketing/other accounts were also present. Second, the most common HBM features were cues to action, barrier reduction, and benefits, whereas any severity was less common and self-efficacy was rare. Third, cue prevalence varied across the four source groups at the omnibus level, but corrected pairwise tests did not isolate a reliable group-to-group difference.

Creator-Led Visibility and Source Authority

The source distribution shows creator-led prominence within this particular search result, not a general decline of professional authority. Influencers/bloggers can build experiential authority through repeated demonstration, personal narrative, and platform fluency, while experts and institutions signal authority through credentials (Lupton, 2018). The present design does not show which source audiences trusted, which notes individual users saw, or which advice was correct. It therefore supports a bounded conclusion about the composition of the archived most-liked corpus only.

Nevertheless, the distribution has practical relevance. Creator communication often combines message value, familiarity, and visible routine, all of which can contribute to perceived credibility and response (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Suhaimi & Ahmad Tajuddin, 2024). Professional health communicators seeking visibility on visual platforms may need to translate evidence into concrete formats while retaining source transparency, qualification, and limits.

An Action-Enabling HBM Pattern

The HBM results describe an action-enabling message pattern. Nearly nine in ten notes contained a concrete cue, and approximately three quarters communicated benefits or reduced barriers. By contrast, fewer than one quarter contained either recorded severity

subtype, and only 5.0% contained self-efficacy language. This pattern suggests that the notes more often supplied what to do and why it might be manageable or desirable than explicit discussion of consequences or confidence-building.

The distinction matters theoretically. Cues, benefits, and barrier reduction can be rendered directly as menus, shopping lists, convenient substitutions, and demonstrations. Their visual form may fit the rapid, practical conventions of the platform. Self-efficacy, however, requires more than a procedure: it requires language or modelling that makes personal capability explicit. The low self-efficacy prevalence shows why it should not be omitted from the HBM framework even when it is empirically uncommon.

Differences in Cues Across Sources

The omnibus association indicates that cue use was not distributed uniformly. Descriptively, influencers/bloggers had the highest cue prevalence and marketing/other accounts the lowest. However, the marketing/other category contained only three notes, and none of the six pairwise comparisons survived Holm correction. The result should therefore be interpreted as evidence of overall heterogeneity, not as a confirmed ranking of individual source groups.

For practice, the descriptive pattern still identifies a communication feature worth testing in stronger designs. Experts can pair nutritional rationale with realistic menus, preparation steps, cost information, and explicit safety boundaries. Such adaptation should not copy influencer style uncritically: systematic reviews show that influencer health communication can produce both benefits and harms (Powell & Pring, 2024), and expert creators must negotiate simplification without abandoning responsible qualification (Kaňková et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings are bounded by the sampling design. Retrieval used one Chinese search term, one platform, one mobile-app context in Xi'an, a five-day period, and a popularity-ordering option. Running the search daily improved continuity of recording but did not remove personalisation, location, timing, or platform-ranking effects. The sample should not be treated as a probability sample or as an estimate of all Xiaohongshu diet content (van Dijck, 2013).

The archived data also impose reproducibility limits. The analytic workbooks retain the final 180 notes but not the 20 excluded records or their item-level screening decisions. The study also used a single-coder design. Although explicit operational definitions, a structured coding workbook, and a cell-level data audit supported coding consistency and data integrity, these procedures do not substitute for independent inter-coder reliability assessment. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory description of the sampled corpus. Future replications should use independently trained coders and retain their item-level decisions. One barrier-reduction value was missing; it was handled with a valid-case denominator rather than imputation.

The marketing/other category contained only three notes, limiting pairwise inference and contributing to small expected cells. Finally, the study classified message content, not nutritional accuracy, disclosure quality, audience interpretation, behaviour change, or

algorithmic causation. Future research should use multiple search terms and locations, repeat sampling over time, audit factual quality, retain complete screening and coding records, and combine content analysis with experiments or interviews.

Conclusion

In the audited corpus of 180 most-liked Xiaohongshu 'Fat Loss Meal' notes, influencers/bloggers were the largest source group and action-enabling HBM features predominated. Cues to action appeared in 89.4% of notes, while self-efficacy appeared in 5.0%. Source identity was associated with cue presence in the full 4×2 table, although no pairwise contrast remained significant after multiplicity correction. These findings describe how a specific popularity-ranked corpus was structured; they do not demonstrate accuracy, persuasive effects, or algorithmic preference.

The study's main contribution is to connect visible source identity with a complete six-feature HBM coding scheme while keeping content claims separate from audience claims. For health communicators, the results support testing evidence-led, visually demonstrable guidance that combines practical cues with safeguards and explicit support for self-efficacy.

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