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REASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON TRADERS' ADOPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS IN THE SOUTH EAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media have become relevant in almost every aspect of human activity including trade. No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the world realize other options to the way things are done and trading in South-eastern part of Nigeria is not left out. This paper examined the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on adoption and usage of social media channels by traders in the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria as a catalyst in enhancing business growth. The technological adoption theory was applied to the study. Descriptive survey research design was deployed through a well structured questionnaire which was used as instrument for data collection. A sample size of 250 traders was purposively drawn from the population of the study which comprised traders in the major markets in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states in the region. The major findings revealed that the traders' adoption of social media in post COVID-19 period was at a minimal rate but its usage during this same period was at a higher scale. Based on the findings, it is recommended that traders should embrace various social media platforms to enhance their business growth.

***Key words:** Adoption, COVID-19, Lockdown, Social Media Channels, Traders.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global disaster, affecting human health and economic safety all over the world. Governments of various nations across the globe are putting up strategies to curtail the spread of the virus which has given rise to global economic slowdown, affecting trade, investment, development and employment. COVID-19 has interrupted global activities across all economic sectors. The disruptions are largely due to the lockdown procedures espoused and put into practice by countries all over the world as a health strategy to alleviate the impact of the pandemic's spread on the human population. The restrictions of movement by all sundry, the closure of borders and constraint on logistics all slowed trade and business activities.

The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in companies and businesses to adopt the Work from Home mechanism due to the restrictions on movements and government

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also introduce the social distancing strategy to curtail the spread of the pandemic. Reluga (2010, p. 12) defines social distancing as "an aspect of human behaviour to reduce the level of contact with others to reduce the transmission of diseases." He states further that "social distancing is very useful when there is no vaccine and to delay epidemics until the vaccine is widely available" (p. 12). On the other hand, social distancing has its other side as it interferes with the processes of marketing of businesses. Hence, as social distancing is introduced, it compels traders in dangerous times to seek for substitute approaches and digital media seem to be alternative means for communicating with customers. Digitalization appears to be the answer to the quarantine policy worries as traders can still market their products through it.

The pandemic brought about a shift in the way business is done which the world has termed the 'new normal'. The digital technologies have been booming before the COVID-19 pandemic, the hit of the pandemic made businesses seek other ways to progress with their business especially during the lockdowns. Teleworking, remote learning, teleconferencing, online health services, e-commerce, digital payments and social media really made the world go round in many regions including south east Nigeria.

Alshehri (2019) sees social media as interactive technologies that aid the creation and sharing of information between two interfaces. Social media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications (Obar & Wildman, 2015) and a user-generated content such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos and data generated through all online interactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2018). Major social media tools include: Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, WeChat, Telegram, Snapchat etc. Literature like Onyejelem, Ude-Akpeh and Uduma (2015) uphold the view that social media have great potentials for economic empowerment through enhancing job creation and skill acquisition, serving as a platform for marketing and business collaboration, as well as offering cheap platforms for small businesses to thrive.

Against this backdrop, the study examines the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the adoption and usage of social media by traders for business. This paper therefore seeks to explore the shift in the ways traders in South-east Nigeria which is one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria that is made up of Igbo people, embraced the advantages inherent in social media to flourish their business at a period before and after COVID-19 lockdown.

1.1 Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. to identify the difference in the adoption and usage of social media channels by Traders in SouthEast geopolitical zone in Nigeria in pre and post COVID-19 lockdown periods.
2. to determine the most adopted and used social media channel by Traders for business in post lockdown period.
3. To find out the aspects of trading that social media channels are used for in post lockdown period.

Research Questions

The following research questions strengthened the study:

What is the extent of difference in the adoption and usage of social media channels by Traders in the pre and post COVID-19 lockdown periods?

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What are the most adopted and used social media channels by Traders for business in post lockdown period?

What are the aspects of trading that social media channels are used for in post lockdown period?

2. LITERATYRE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Understanding COVID-19

COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the new Corona virus, SARS CoV-2 (Total Health Trust, 2020). The Corona virus disease (COVID-19) caused by Corona virus, belongs to a family of RNA viruses. World Health Organisation declared it a pandemic due to its rapid spread to over 210 countries as of March 2020 with attendant severe public health and socio economic concerns in many parts of the world, including in Nigeria (Iboi, Sharomi, Ngonghala & Gumel, 2020). COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets from an infected person such as coughing, sneezing or talking.

In Nigeria, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on the 27th February, 2020. With a record period, the index of confirmed cases increased with daily cases in different States in Nigeria (National Centre for Disease Control, 2020). As a proactive measure against the spread of COVID-19, the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 was inaugurated to work with the National Centre for Disease Control, Ministry of Health and other agencies. Post COVID-19 marks the period of lifting of lockdown in various countries to the period of search for COVID-19 vaccine. The post–COVID-19 typically refers to the period beyond 2021, when the economy starts to rebound, according to growth projections from the International Monetary Fund (Strusani & Howungbon, 2021).

Major preventive measures initiated by the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 and Ministry of Health include: (a) the use of face covering (face mask) in combination with (b) avoiding large gatherings, (b) physical distancing by maintaining a distance of 2 metres between yourself and others, (c) regular hand washing with soap under running water and (d) frequent cleaning of surfaces with soap and water or disinfectants (NCDC, 2020).

2.1.2 Social media and Trading

Social media refer to socially interactive internet-based platform(s) for creation, processing and sharing of messages, images and multimedia. In business, social media is an indispensable tool to engage customers and drive sale volumes. With a variety of web options, social media provides an interactive avenue for business transactions.

Alshehri (2019) defines social media as a web-based service that allows individuals to build public profiles, articulate users when sharing connections with others, and view a list of links made by other users in a system. Hew (2011) states that social media awareness is the primary determinant of informal scientific communication. Alencar (2016) made a significant contribution from the results of his research on the meaningful relationship between social media awareness and social media adoption for informal scientific communication.

The use of social media has continued to elicit scholarly discourses. This is because; each social media network has its unique characteristics in terms of audience reach, peculiarity of service and applicability in targeting mass business patrons. There are, however common features of these social

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media. They are Internet-driven and accessibility is done through active Internet access.

2.1.2.1 FaceBook

Facebook is a commonest social media network. It is an ideal alternative to telemarketing and direct-response marketing platform, which can provide immediate and direct answers to marketing questions and problems within the least time period (Sooraj and Rooma, 2013). The personalised nature of its pages allows a businessman to do multiple advertisements on products and services as its linkage ability is a boost to business practice. Luke (2009) explains that Facebook allows companies to connect with many more people through newsfeed page, phone feature, video feature and engaging of business patrons in a virtual meeting. Specific features of Facebook tools for business growth include: Facebook profile, (b) Facebook groups, (c) Facebook groups, (d) Business/Fan pages, (e) Social ads and polls and (f) Facebook messages.

2.1.2.2 Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging and social media tool that is used for posting and interacting with messages known as 'tweets.' Its use is increasingly gaining popularity in both social interaction and business settings and news outlets. With active users globally, Twitter has recorded tremendous success due to its formal outlet. Messages through Twitter are easily acknowledged as a verified message of the owner of the tweets. As a tool of social marketing, Twitter adopts a brief approach to messages known as 'Tweets' which consists of a maximum 140 characters transmitted on a large scale across the network, instantaneously (Jansen et al., 2009).

2.1.2.3 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a social media network that is used in social interaction that is used to send and receive messages, makes voice and video calls and shares images, documents and other contents between two interactive ends. With the introduction of WhatsApp for Business API in 2018, the social network has proved a veritable medium of business growth. It facilitates wider reach of advertising and marketing messages. The features of voice and video are distinctively good for viral marketing. There is no need for physical proximity as transactions can be bargained for and ordered with the aid of WhatsApp chats.

2.1.2.4 Instagram

Instagram is another popularly used social media network. It is mainly a photo and video sharing social networking. Its unique feature is the ability to create and post pictures and videos of high resolution quality. With millions of users, Instagram has become a veritable network for social interaction and social media marketing. A trader can easily upload a picture of his product or service and other online users will react accordingly.

From a wider perspective, social media cover a collection of websites and applications that interact with each other and other communication components. It provides veritable means of engaging in businesses. Wigmore (2020) addresses the business application of social media and states that it is used to market products, promote brands, connect to current customers and foster new business.

Specific applications of social media in business include (a) crowdsourcing in which, customers use social media platforms to blend business with information technology in terms of

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information collection, processing and dissemination, (b) social media analytics in which blogs and social media outputs are used to analyse the outcomes of business trends, (c) social media marketing links users (customers) with available market by creating appealing content that broaden sales output, (d) social customer relationship marketing (CRM) in which users use social media platforms to compel people to like their brand on their social media platforms and (e) enterprise social networking which connects companies to individuals with similar business interests.

One distinct use of social media for businesses is known as social media marketing which uses social media platforms and websites to promote a product or service (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016). This is achieved by using the Internet to post user-generated contents such as online comment and product reviews. Collaborating with the above, Wigmore (2020) states that social media marketing links users (customers) with available market by creating appealing content that broaden sales output. With proper social networking sites and blogs, people 'retweet' or 'repost' comments made by others about a product being promoted, which occurs quite frequently on some social media sites (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009).

2.1.3 Social Media Usage During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 and post COVID-19 periods have increasingly high demand of the use of social media in boosting businesses. Kumar, Dhir, Talwar, Chakraborty and Kaur (2020) agree that the growth of social media platforms has transformed the dynamics of the electronic marketplace by creating social networks of consumers, opinion leaders, and field experts. They concluded that integrated marketing promotional messages can be effective at influencing consumers' perceptions about product image and lead to consumption behaviours.

People use social media platforms for different purposes. While some users may simply use social media for relaxation (Buss & Strauss, 2009), others go beyond the satisfaction of use-and-gratifications paradigm to employ these social networks for economic activities. Collaborating with latter position, Sooraj and Rooma (2013) assert that social media has changed the way organizations do business online with the creation of social media marketing platforms. The emergence of Facebook, for instance; as a marketing platform has ushered a new era of personalized and directed advertising. Facebook advertising has consequently grown in popularity.

2.1.4 Managing Adoption and Use of Social Media: Matters Arising

The case of adoption remains important. When a new technology enters market, people take reasonable time and advertisement to react to the new idea, product or service. This is tenet of diffusion of innovation theory. It recognises the attitudes of people towards a new idea, product or service. Adoption means the art of choosing and making use of a thing that was not originally of the user. In the case of adoption and use of social media for economic activities, Arta and Sundjaja (2016) agree to significant use of social media in economic activities. In the case of Facebook, people use Facebook page insight to see the engagement of target audience. Insights provide information about page's performance such as demographic data about target audience and how people are responding to our posts.

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The post COVID-19 adoption of social media either shows a drop or rise in terms of adoption and use social media networks in business transactions. Social media networks were employed in emerging markets during the COVID-19 crisis which increased the rate of their adoption (Strusani & Howungbon, 2021). They argue that discussions with technology investors and market experts have indicated the expectation that COVID-19 could accelerate innovation and technology adoption. In Nigeria, there is increase in adoption and use of social media for business transaction at both early COVID-19/Lockdown and post COVID-19 period. However, the social media tool employed and its effectiveness continue to elicit empirical discourses.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Technological Adoption Theory

The study was anchored on technological adoption theory which explains the interplay of technology and the degree of acceptance of technology. Advancement in communication technology has revolutionalised information collection, processing and dissemination (Kenechukwu, 2014). Technology adoption is an essential topic in modern business practice. It looks at the influence of Internet and other information technology in managing business communication (Xiong & Chapple, 2016). The theory supports Rogers (2003) diffusion of innovation theory which explains audiences' attitudes to new ideas and technology. The theory explains that access to resources and knowledge of innovation are essential factors that affect the adoption of technology. Social media plays significant importance in the paradigm shift from analog to digital transformation of businesses (Kunsman, 2018). The adoption and use of social media for economic growth cut across different forms of social networks. Xiong et al. (2016) observe a high adoption of Twitter for financial reporting because it tends to only certain types of financial information. A tweet is seen as a credible formal position of a user.

2.3 Empirical Review

Corti and Nathan (2020) carried out a study on the impact of covid-19 on micro, small and medium businesses in Uganda and found out that micro and small businesses experienced a larger decline in businesses activity compared to medium and large firm since most of the country's micro and small businesses halted operations due to their inability to implement preventative health measures such as provision of on-site lodging for employees, and sanitizers and hand washing equipment for customers. These preventive measures have resulted in an increase in operating expenses for businesses that continued to stay open. Consequently, a majority of micro and small businesses, particularly in the service sector, had to close because of the pandemic restrictions maintained. On the other hand, the majority of the medium and large firms do not foresee closure. Analysis revealed that manufacturing and agricultural sectors were slightly more resilient than service firms.

Effendi, Sugandini and Istanto (2020) carried a study with the purpose to analyze the behavioral intention to adopt social media in SMEs affected by the COVID-19 crisis, based on the TOE Model. The study used the TOE framework as a theoretical basis. The research was important because COVID-19 has destroyed most of the SMEs, and SMEs are exposed to social media technology to market their products. The success of social media adoption has

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helped SMEs to be able to rise from adversity. Respondents in this study were 250 SMEs in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Structural equation modelling with AMOS was the technique employed for data analysis. The results of the study indicated that SMEs affected by the COVID-19 crisis have a high awareness of social media and have a high intention to adopt social media as a means of connecting with customers for their product sales. The need to adopt social media is to a large extent influenced by varied contexts including organizational, technological, environmental and awareness of social media. The findings of the study suggest that in times of crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government support is needed

Hakeem, Shelby and Meredith (2021) conducted three rounds of phone surveys with wholesale and retail traders in Lagos, Nigeria, to understand how their businesses were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated policy responses. They found high short-run compliance with public health measures, even though traders had virtually zero revenue during a month-long lockdown. There was a rebound of sales immediately after the lockdown. Nonetheless, sales could not return to the same level prior to the pandemic. Traders and business owners reported low cash flow, poor sales and lack of ease in accessing funds. Majority of traders increased the prices of their goods in order to contain the impacts without necessarily resorting to loans. They show more interest in exploring ways of containing poor patronage and challenges associated with supplies. Policies that could help in addressing supply chain failures, access to remote sales including e-commerce would be the way out.

3. METHODOLOGY

The Descriptive survey research design was adopted because the opinion of Traders were obtained by means of structured questionnaire to enable the Researchers explore the Traders' adoption and usage of social media channels in the pre and post COVID-19 lockdown period. This study also availed the Researchers the privilege of investigating the problems raised in this study under realistic settings. Thus, a total of 250 traders were sampled and drawn from five major markets in the five states in the South east region of Nigeria namely, Ariaria Market (Abia State), Onitsha Main Market (Anambra State), Abakaliki International Market (Ebonyi State), Ogbete Main Market (Enugu State) and Alaba International Market, Owerri (Imo State). The implication is that 50 Traders were randomly selected from each market. Traders from these markets have adequate representation of the characteristics of the population under study. Analysis of data collected from the field were done and presented with statistical tool of frequency and percentage tables.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The researchers used secondary administration and on the spot collection while administering the questionnaire; so there was 100 percent response rate. However, 241 respondents attested positively to the use of social media for trading while 9 Traders were negative on the use of social media for business. This non interest by this minority made their responses invalid for use in this study. So, further analysis was done with the number of respondents that used social media channels since the onus of this study is all about Traders' adoption and usage of social

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media for business growth. In order to answer the first research question, the following data were analyzed.

Table 1: Period at which Social Media were adopted for Trading

Periods	Frequency	Percentage
Pre COVID-19 Lockdown	169	70.12
Post COVID-19 Lockdown	72	29.88
Total	241	100

In Table 1 above, 70.12 percent of the respondents had adopted and used social media for their business before the COVID-19 period, while 29.88 percent joined the wagon at the post COVID-19 lockdown era. This indicates that most traders in South-eastern region of Nigeria had adopted and were using social media for their trading before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: Various Social Media Used by Traders in Post Covid-19 Lockdown Era

Social Media	Frequency	Percentage
WhatsApp	103	42.74
Facebook	32	13.28
Instagram	11	4.56
Telegram	7	2.91
Twitter	5	2.08
WhatsApp & Facebook	41	17.01
Whatsapp, Facebook & Instagram	23	9.54
WhatsApp & Instagram	19	7.88
Total	241	100

The above table reveals that some respondents use more than one social medium for trading. Majority of the respondents use only WhatsApp, representing 42.74 percent of the respondents. 41 respondents representing 17.01 percent use both WhatsApp and Facebook. 13.28 percent use only Facebook. 9.54 percent of the respondents use the combination of WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram for their businesses, while the minority uses only Instagram, Telegram Twitter or the combination of them as shown on the above table. Whatsapp and Facebook or the combination of both is at the peak of social media that were used by traders in the five states that make up the south east region of Nigeria.

Table 3: Social Media that were adopted for trading in Post COVID-19 Lockdown

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Social Media	Frequency	Percentage %
Facebook	18	25.00
WhatsApp	53	73.61
Instagram	1	1.39
Total	72	100

The above table 3 shows the social media that were mostly adopted in post COVID-19 period for trading are WhatsApp with 73.61 percent adoption rate and Facebook pulls 25 percent of the frequency and Instagram has 1.39 percent. Other social media platforms were not indicated as part of the social media that were adopted by the traders in South East Nigeria in post COVID-19 lockdown period.

Table 4: Period when Social Media were more in use for Trading

Period	Frequency	Percentage %
Pre COVID 19 Lockdown	33	19.53
Post COVID 19 Lockdown	136	80.47
Total	169	100

Table 4 reveals that social media are more in use in the post COVID-19 lockdown period when compared to pre COVID-19 era as 80.47 percent of the respondents indicate that they use social media more in the post COVID-19 era as against 19.53 percent that indicated otherwise.

Table 5: Aspects of Trading that Social Media are used for in Post Covid-19 Lockdown Era

Business Aspects	Frequency	Percentage %
Order Placement	51	21.16
Advertisement	61	25.31
Price Negotiation	13	5.39
Advertisement & price negotiation	7	2.91
Source for new products	22	9.13
Monitoring of market trends	6	2.49
Place order, advertisement, price negotiation	44	18.26
Place order & advertisement	16	6.64
Source for supplier and advertisement	9	3.73
Place order & price negotiation	12	4.98
Total	241	100

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Table 5 indicates the various aspects of business that social media are used in post COVID-19 lockdown period to facilitate advancement in trading. 25.31 percent of the respondents use social media platform for advertisement, followed by 21.16 percent who use social media to place orders with their supplies. 18.26 percent use social media platforms to place order, advertise their products and negotiate competitive prices for their goods. The minority use social media in combined functions like source for new products, price negotiations, advertisement et cetera.

4.1 Further discussion of Results

The study established that most traders adopted the use of social media for business in pre covid-19 period as minority adopted its use in the post COVID-19 lockdown period. This supports the technology adoption theory as an essential topic in modern business practice which explains the interplay of technology and the degree of acceptance of technology as well as access to resources and knowledge of innovation are essential factors that affect the adoption of technology.

The study revealed that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most social media that were adopted in post covid-19lockdown era and the two social media remain the most used among all social media traders use for business growth just as the opinion of Sooraj and Rooma (2013) that Facebook is the commonest social media network and is an ideal alternative to telemarketing and direct-response marketing platform, which can provide immediate and direct answers to marketing questions and problems within the least time period.

Majority of the traders affirmed that social media are in use more in the post COVID-19 period than the period before it. Social media are used to place order, negotiate prices, monitor business trends, source for new products that can replace existing ones, and for advertisement. Even though they claimed the use of social media has increased overhead cost and birthed more competitive market, yet majority claimed that business cannot flourish successfully in the post COVID-19 period without the presence of social media. This is in line with Strusani and Howungbon (2021) who noted that technologies (social media networks) have been employed in emerging markets during the COVID-19 crisis which increased the rate of its adoption. They argue that discussions with technology investors and market experts have indicated the expectation that COVID-19 could accelerate innovation and technology adoption. Both in the early and post COVID-19 lockdown period in Nigeria, there was an increase in the adoption and use of social media for commercial purposes. This finding is also in line with Wigmore (2020) study which addresses the business application of social media and states that it is used to market products, promote brands, connect to current customers and foster new business.

Some traders claim that social media have enhanced their sales as they can do business at point in time without hindrance of any sort. Few affirmed that it has given them wider business network as social media have birthed wider platform to attract customers even beyond the boundaries of state, country and continent. Some traders trusted social media for efficient communication response as room for better comprehension is built through social media chat rooms that allow voice notes, pictures and video calls, which aid faster communication with customers and suppliers. There is freedom from the fear of

violating COVID-19 rules as business continues in spite of COVID-19 pandemic. Sellers and buyers can do business while separated in space and time. This supports the study of Onyejelem et al. (2015) where they focused on the economic dimension of social media in which they discussed its place in the society's wealth creation and distribution. Literature also upholds the view that social media have great potentials for economic empowerment through enhancing job creation and skill acquisition, serving as a platform for marketing and business collaboration, as well as offering cheap platforms for small businesses to thrive (Kumar et al., 2020; Wigmore, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Traders' adoption of social media channels in post COVID-19 period is at a minimal rate but its usage in this same period is on a high scale. It is evident in this study that traders in South East Nigeria have adopted and been using social media for their business growth before COVID-19 pandemic started. The relevance of social media usage towards business growth in South East Nigeria is evident in the various aspects of business these traders apply the use of social media to facilitate continuity and advancement in business. This usage is attributed to the roles social media play in the growth of their businesses; these include the wide platform for advertisement, easy and fast communication among suppliers and buyers, engaging in business beyond the barriers of space and time.

The Researchers therefore recommended that:

1. Traders should embrace other social media to enhance their business growth, not just limiting their adoption usage to only WhatsApp and Facebook as the world has turned to a global village, there is need for traders to avail themselves the opportunity on other social media platforms.
2. There is increase in the cost of acquiring devices and network services due to various economical policies emanating in Nigerian society; there in need for Nigerian government to review policies that are negatively affecting the stability of the economy in order to create a conducive environment for business to flourish.
3. Network service providers should ensure there is strong, stable and reliable network for users in order to aid smooth running of their business that is devoid of network fluctuations.
4. National Communication Commission (NCC) should put forward guidelines that will govern the way advertisement is run on social media; not forgetting to ensure its compliance.

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