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Ambassadors for the profession, not just rebranding

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Abstract

Inspired by the longstanding home economics discourse around its professional image, this position paper explains the essence and benefits of branding, rebranding and the new idea of ambassadorships. Ambassadors are on a mission to work on behalf of the profession in ways more substantial than tweaking images (i.e., branding and rebranding). They know that rhetoric (persuasive and effective communication), dialogue (coming to common understandings), and diplomacy (skill and tact dealing with recalcitrant or misguided people) are needed. The ambassador approach respects the longstanding concern for our professional image and shifts the discourse to our reality (here and now constraints and opportunities). An artful and strategic blend of branding, rebranding and ambassadorship is proposed as an important strategy for future proofing the profession and discipline.

KEYWORDS: HOME ECONOMICS, PROFESSIONAL IMAGE, BRANDING AND REBRANDING, BRAND AMBASSADORS, FUTURE PROOFING

The position developed in this paper was inspired by the longstanding home economics¹ discourse around its professional image. The profession and academic discipline have long lamented the lack of respect, authority and legitimacy at a time when it is most needed (Deacon, 2012; Pendergast, 2009; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Many countries have rebranded the profession by changing its name, thinking this strategy is the panacea to our troubles (McGregor, 2010). Conversely, in its study about rebranding home economics, the International Federation for Home Economics' (IFHE) Think Tank Committee (2013) concluded that the brand equity of the name was strong enough to eschew renaming, opting instead for rebranding and repositioning home economics.

The research question guiding the argument developed in this paper is whether (re)branding is the best strategy for future proofing the profession - is there a better approach? Future proofing refers to "anticipating future developments to minimize negative impacts and optimize opportunities" (Pendergast, 2009, p. 517). To that end, this paper explains the essence and benefits of branding, rebranding, and ambassadorships. Both parts of a brand, the tangible (e.g., logo, color, and slogan) and intangible (e.g., perceptions of, feelings about, meanings of), may epitomize character and values (IFHE Think Tank Committee, 2013). However, ambassadors are the human representation of a branded entity (Smith, Kendall, Knighton, & Wright, 2018). They are able to engage in conversations, dialogue, debates and discourse about the profession and discipline. The latter align with the IFHE Think Tank Committee's (2013) idea of repositioning the profession rather than

¹ This article uses the globally-recognized name of home economics fully respecting that some countries have opted for other names: family and consumer sciences, consumer sciences, family studies, family ecology, human ecology, and human sciences.

renaming it. This paper proposes that combining branding and rebranding with ambassadorship is a viable approach to future proof the profession and discipline.

For clarification, home economics is both an academic discipline and a profession. A discipline is a branch of knowledge studied and gained in a specific field of study in higher education. Disciplines are comparatively self-contained, isolated domains of learning, sustained and evolved through research and scholarship. A profession is a vocation founded upon specialized training in a discipline leading to licensing and certification to practice. Professions involve a responsibility to ethically serve the public using a complex, evolving body of knowledge that is informed by disciplinary scholarship (McGregor, 2011).

Branding

Brand is Old English *brond*, ‘flame, fire, torch’ (Harper, 2018). In marketing, a *brand* (noun) is a name, term, slogan, design, symbol (image) or other feature that professions and organizations can use to distinguish themselves from their rivals in the eyes of the public (Fahy & Jobber, 2015). As a verb, ‘to brand’ means to put a mark on something to show people that you *own it*. It would mean conceiving the profession as a trademarked product or service. A *trademark* is a legally-registered, distinctive characteristic by which something comes to be known. It is an insignia, logo and/or slogan that distinguishes one thing from all others (Anderson, 2014; Kwortnik, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates several branding images used by various home economics associations around the world (African, Canadian American and international, used with permission). A critical analysis of these images would be a telling enterprise, left for another time.

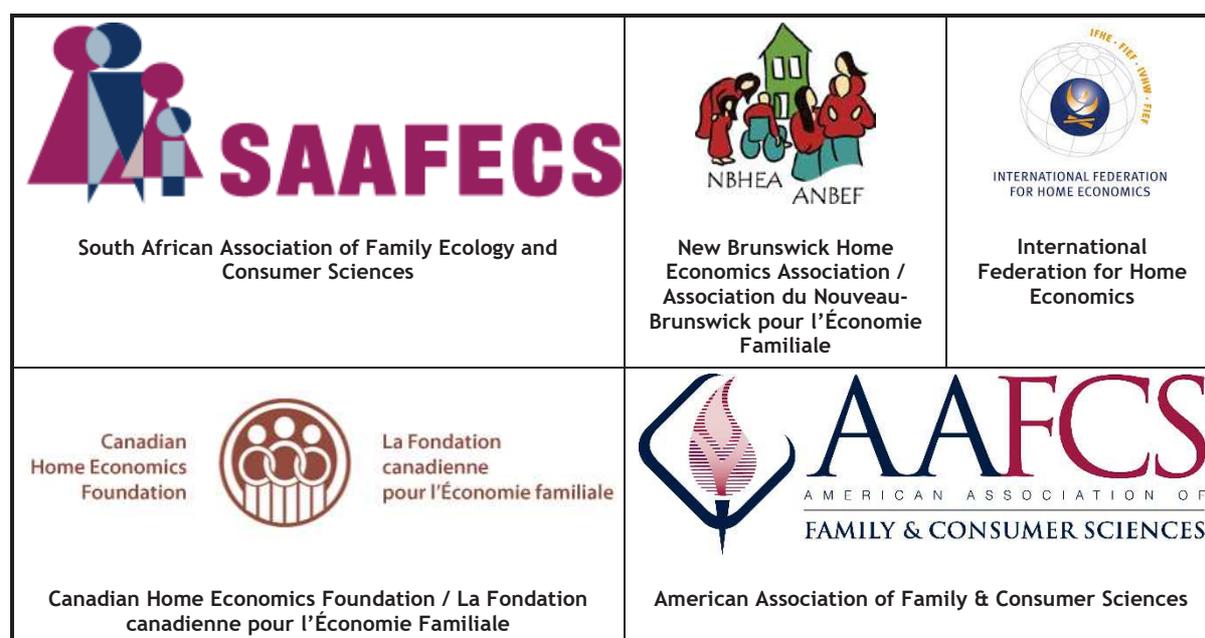


Figure 1 Examples of home economics associations' branding images

Any branding initiative should meet several criteria (Knox & Bickerton, 2003) while addressing the needs of both the profession and the public. Regarding the former, brands should (a) be developed from the outside in and promoted from the inside out; (b) be based on vision, mission and ends valued by everyone who will be using the identity; and (c) empower home economists to use it to demonstrate their identity. Regarding the public, the brand should (d) be promoted with consistent visuals and messaging so that people know they are dealing with a stable and secure entity, (e) evoke the right emotional response from the public, and (f) be developed with the public in mind to create a better ‘customer’ experience (see also McGregor, 2007). From this perspective, branding is seen as a good thing, but is it enough for future proofing home economics?

Deacon (2012, p. 86) argued that the home economics profession must be presented as a “branded and marketable ‘package’ which brings together our unique perspective of the family, our specialized and consolidated knowledge, and communicates obvious, proud and coherent collegial solidarity” (p. 86). Like her, those who favor branding the profession often argue that, to be more visible and

accessible, we must be able to define a distinctive characteristic by which people come to know us. A good brand benefits the profession because it can help build public recognition by telling people that we are in the running for the services and products they are seeking. Customer and public recognition can help the profession gain a more competitive market edge. People who share the same values articulated through the profession's branding process are more inclined to turn to the profession for help and insights and to remain loyal. And a strong, well-known brand (i.e., a public image) can enhance the profession's credibility and perceived legitimacy (Fanaras, 2013).

Rebranding

Brand as torch is telling because torches eventually burn out and must be discarded or relit (i.e., rebranded). This means people can anticipate needing to reexamine their brand from time to time. For instance, home economics is not the only profession concerned with individual and family well being and quality of life. We must continually communicate how we are different and make people value us and want us. Deacon (2012) believed that successful and thoughtful rebranding is necessary. It would involve dealing with pervasive and damning home economics memes, those "enduring packets of cultural knowledge about Home Economics that have survived through generations" (p. 85), replacing them with newer, vanguard images of and messaging about the profession.

Rebranding involves creating a new look for an *established* brand with the intention of developing a differentiated identity in the minds of people who rely on the profession or its organizations, or who would value it if they could be convinced of its merit (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Rebranding is necessary when the organization is felt or seen to be out of touch with the public. Perhaps the profession lacks awareness in the marketplace. Or the existing brand no longer reflects what the profession does. Maybe people in the field do not know how to talk about the profession. Or the profession is struggling with attracting new people (Hinge, 2011). Rebranding can be undertaken for one of several reasons, including underperformance, underappreciation, misunderstanding, and rejuvenation of a brand (Shetty, 2011). Whatever the reason, "rebranding is more than a new suit of clothes. It's about bringing new clarity and focus to your entire business" (Hinge, 2011, p.16).

How does a business, profession or organization know that it is time to consider rebranding itself? Hinge (2011) developed a 12-point checklist (see below) and suggested that if even two items are checked, it is time to take a long, hard look at the existing brand. For home economics, all 12 items are relevant (see list below) but items 4, 7, 11 and 12 seem to be especially crucial to our ability to future proof the profession. These four items deal, respectively, with the stagnant growth of the profession, our inability to explain our relevance and legitimacy, the complex changes in families and society, and the real need to take the profession to the next level. The remaining eight signs that it is time to rebrand are noted below (adapted from Hinge, 2011):

1. getting fewer leads than in the past (i.e., inquiries into or interest in the profession)
2. entering a new market
3. introducing significantly new services or products
4. profession's growth has slowed, stopped or started to reverse
5. new competitors have entered the market for the profession's services
6. visual brand looks tired compared to the competition
7. struggle to describe the profession or how it is different from the competition
8. losing a higher percentage of competitive bids than in the past
9. profession has changed significantly since last adjusting the brand
10. struggling to attract top talent and new recruits
11. nature of clients and customers has changed significantly
12. trying to figure out how to take the profession to the next level.

Successful rebranding has many powerful and persuasive benefits. Hinge (2011) identified 20 reasons to rebrand a firm with many reasons resonating with rebranding a profession and academic discipline like home economics. Not only would the profession look and sound more contemporary and

sophisticated, but practitioners would be better able to explain what home economics is and does and not be ashamed to associate with it. Concurrently, the public would be better able to understand what home economics is about and more inclined to use us and refer people to us. Credibility would increase and the profession would be considered a leading contender for practice, research, funding, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships. People would seek us out because we would be seen to have legitimacy and authority. Home economics would gain visibility to the public, and the profession could command higher valuation than in the past.

Shetty (2011) cautioned against taking a narrow approach when rebranding, which would entail simply renaming or changing the logo or slogan while ignoring the underlying structural factors that are likely much more crucial. Harden, Hall, and Pucciarelli (2018) discussed structural factors as they pertain to home economics. They suggested that the North American profession began to lose ground in the 1930s and again in the 1970s when it faced the conflagration of several structural factors. At the apex of the profession's decline, the majority (70%) of non-home economists surveyed felt that the profession's major function and role in society were relatively unknown (Crosbie, 1978), explained by several factors. As specializations proliferated, the original focus on social reform and social responsibility waned. Specializations also lead to a reduced ability or inclination to engage in integrative practice meaning we were not viewed as able to solve complex problems, only technical, quick-fix, specialized problems. Founded by women and originally focused on women in the home, the profession took some serious hits from the radical feminist movement. It asserted that women can only be free if they rid themselves of the inherently oppressive and dominating patriarchal ideology and the male-controlled capitalistic hierarchy (Echols, 1989).

To continue, declining enrolments and a perceived misalignment of home economics departments' missions with institutional missions have also been attributed to our decline and dismissal. Misguided and prejudiced journalism continues to underserve and undermines the profession. The lingering stereotype of "women who cook and sew" (Harden et al., 2018, p. 20), viewed by others as a negative, low-valued enterprise, continues to hurt our image. Maskow (1982) added the two practices of employing faculty from other disciplines due to a lack of doctoral-preparation programs in home economics and neglecting to deal with the decline of 'orientation to the profession' courses in higher education programs (see also McGregor, 2015, 2018). Both practices have paved the way for generations of students to not see themselves as home economists by whatever name because they lacked an opportunity to develop a personal philosophy of, and identity with, the field.

To offset the structural challenges undermining the profession and discipline, home economists, attendant associations and the academic discipline must differentiate themselves from the competition. They must clearly articulate their diverse role, mission, vision and philosophy and the difference they offer to the saturated world of people focused on the well being and quality of life of individuals and families. Messaging is an important element when it comes to (re)positioning the profession as a valuable and viable entity for addressing global and societal complexities as they impact individuals, families and communities. What is it that we do? Why should people turn to us? Any (re)branding needs to include information about the changes home economics intends to make and how - the actual intended impact of our work and contributions (see Pass, 2017).

Steel and Black (2010) commented on the challenge of distilling the complexity and multiplicity of a large entity like a university campus to a clear, concise institutional brand. The same challenges hold for home economics. The holistic, interdisciplinary and integrated profession and discipline are deeply complex with multiple specializations as well as generalized skill sets, competencies and, ideally, philosophical positions (Kieren, Vaines, & Badir, 1984). Capturing this complexity in a pithy brand is indeed a challenge and, quite frankly, insufficient given the threats to the profession and discipline's future.

Steel and Black's (2010) description of a complex institutional brand is readily extrapolated to the home economics profession and discipline. An institutional brand is so "much more than mere promotional window dressing" (p. 98). A complex profession's brand would be a concise, compelling expression of its identity. It would be a distillation of the profession's mission, vision and values that help focus passion and enthusiasm among practitioners and between practitioners and stakeholders. The brand would attract external audiences to the profession and discipline. It would serve as an organizing principle that helps (re)position the profession among its competitors. The profession's brand would also reflect the unique and distinctive value that it and the home economics discipline bring to the world (Steel & Black, 2010).

Ambassadors

Despite that successfully rebranding the profession presents the prospect of positive change (Deacon, 2012; Hinge, 2011), another alternative (or supplement) is for home economics practitioners to view themselves as ambassadors of the profession (McGregor, 2007). Ambassador stems from Medieval Latin *ambactia*, 'mission' (Harper, 2018). As ambassadors, we could firmly position the profession and discipline in the center of the complex 21st century. We could act on the power of our "convergent moment, a time of opportunity where several key societal factors are occurring simultaneously" (Pendergast, 2009, p. 504).

McGregor (2007) explained that ambassador refers to a spokesperson for the profession, an accredited, personal representative authorized to represent the profession and carry its message to areas within and outside the field of practice, to others' attention. This message would refer to our mission, unique approach to practice, valued ends and such. Ambassadors are entrusted with extensive power. Their main function is to advance the interests of the profession, professional associations and academic discipline, both quietly behind the scenes and in the public eye. Ambassadors would have promotional material on hand and be well versed in an agreed-to value statement about the profession and academic discipline. They would readily share these messages in their networks, spreading the word about the profession and its invaluable, differentiated contributions to society.

People become ambassadors for various reasons but mostly so they can (a) help out with creating positive momentum for the profession or organization, (b) express their honour of being associated with the branded entity, (c) gain easy and quick access to information about the profession and what is happening, and (d) attend meetings and events and have the chance to network with other professionals (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). They construed this as "public diplomacy [work], in which interaction and dialog sometimes are considered value-creating factors" (p. 48). The downside is that ambassadorships may not be sustainable if the person only sees them as having a temporary purpose for personal gain, rather than benefiting the profession at large over the long term. Also, people often drift away from ambassadorship positions because of unsustainable commitments over time (Andersson & Ekman, 2009).

Brand Ambassador

The idea of a *brand ambassador* is related to being an ambassador for the profession. Evolving out of brand management (Andersson & Ekman, 2009), a brand ambassador is a relatively new, under-researched academic concept (Smith et al., 2018). It is a paid, appointed or self-selected position within an organization (or discipline). The person is charged with representing the organization in a positive manner and increasing brand uptake and engagement with the organization (including brand awareness, increased sales, and strengthened public image). This person is the mouthpiece, the human representative, of the branded organization. Brand ambassadors have to authenticate the brand, nurture it so the organization can grow and thrive, and defend and protect its reputation when required (Clive, 2017; Neuvoo, 2017).

Brand ambassadors are also expected to (a) humanize the branded organization, (b) facilitate relational connections and (c) engage with a full range of stakeholder groups as they (d) carry organizational messages, (e) reinforce the organization's identity and (f) legitimize the organization in the public's eye (Smith et al., 2018). They are also responsible for the organization's visibility made possible through a deep understanding of its mission, values, functions and contributions to society. This responsibility entails ongoing monitoring of the profession, organization and discipline's evolution, philosophy, public acceptance, and customer/client/partner's needs (Neuvoo, 2017), as well as the disciplinary knowledge base.

This role is not fraught free. Brand ambassadorships revolve around negotiating influence, identity, and risk of representation. Respectively, anyone in this role assumes the potential for influence because the role comes with a voice and empowerment. Their role is to help the branded organization dominate in certain areas, achieved by exerting influence. Brand ambassadors have to balance this influence with their identity as an organization's ambassador. This identity will be informed by and inform their personality, all of which can impact the organization's image and vice versa. Indeed, brand ambassadors have to negotiate the real risk of seeming to overtly promote or advocate for an organization, which, done irresponsibly, can have negative consequences for the organization's

legitimacy, image and reputation (Clive, 2017; Smith et al., 2018). A lot rides on the brand ambassador's shoulders, a segue to the idea of supportive networking.

Brand Ambassador Network

Related to the brand ambassador concept is the idea of a *brand ambassador network* (Andersson & Ekman, 2009) - a complex, interlocking system of like-minded people formed for mutual assistance (Harper, 2018). This idea has merit for home economics, which is a vast network of practitioners operating locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Extrapolating from Andersson and Ekman's (2009) application of networks to place branding, a brand ambassador network for home economics would be defined as a network aimed at promoting the profession's image, attractiveness and relevance. This network would comprise home economists with strong connections with and within the profession. Such networks would likely vary in size, structure and purpose, depending on the context (e.g., country, culture, history).

The potential of the profession and discipline can be harnessed through brand ambassador networks. Within the network, ambassadors would use word of mouth and written communication to perpetuate a "credible testimony of the distinctive character" of the profession and academic discipline to the public at large (Andersson & Ekman, 2009, p. 43). They would do this through their ambassador network, which is presumed to be a channel of communication through which to assist in enhancing the general competitiveness and relevance of the profession and discipline. These "human networks . . . are considered an invaluable resource for meeting and adapting to change" (p. 43). They are also key to any developmental initiatives struck by the profession or organization. The more mature and consolidated the brand ambassador network, the more effective it is in strengthening and future proofing the profession and academic discipline. When discussing rebranding, Deacon (2012) affirmed the need for "an obvious, proud and coherent collegial solidarity" (p. 86) within the home economics brand.

Brand ambassador networks would further serve to mobilize and nurture local home economists' pride in and allegiance to the profession, and boost their self-confidence. "Brand ambassador networks evoke feelings of intimacy and create interaction as well as help reach a wide audience of people that would not otherwise be reached" by individual practitioners (Pelkonen, 2018, p. 11). Through these human networks, local home economists can become more aware of the value and achievements of the profession and discipline leading to improved support for and association with home economics. Andersson and Ekman (2009) referred to this as "value creation through relationships" (p. 44). Of deep relevance to home economics and its concern for its image, Andersson and Ekman (2009) reasoned that brand ambassador networks extend branding beyond communications to include behaviors thus emphasizing reality rather than image. This means the focus would be on what actually exists (i.e., how we are behaving and being perceived, and why) instead of an idealistic, unrealistic image of what should exist. The ideal cannot emerge without due consideration of reality.

Andersson and Ekman (2009) further recommended that brand ambassador networks need someone to coordinate and moderate the interaction within and beyond the network. They found that usually one person assumes or is assigned to this role, which combines image building, associated (re)branding and wider conversations. McGregor (2007) actually advocated for all home economists to assume the ambassadorship role instead of one particular person being appointed to a particular network. In some instances, a symbiotic relationship emerges wherein the network (formalized or not) benefits from the reputation of one of its ambassadors or vice versa. Andersson and Ekman (2009) also encountered ambassador councils that acted as an advisory board for the network, guiding and informing the ambassadors' work. This idea resonates with home economics' inclination to value interconnected, system-based, reciprocal relationships.

Summary and Conclusions

Figure 2 summarizes the main distinctions among the four interlocked concepts shaping the argument in this paper. Done well, and the key is *done well*, branding can work for the profession and academic discipline. That being said, this success depends on those engaged in creating the brand being attuned to the deep underlying structural issues shaping the strength, viability and relevance of the profession. Structural awareness staves of misguided initiatives (Shetty, 2011). If it is determined that the success of the profession is being threatened, one strategy is to *rebrand* it by coming up

with a new way(s) to reposition and differentiate it in the public's mind. But simply changing the brand (image) may not be enough. History tells us that new names and redesigned logos and slogans fell short of what was needed (Deacon, 2012; Harden et al., 2018; McGregor, 2007, 2010; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007).

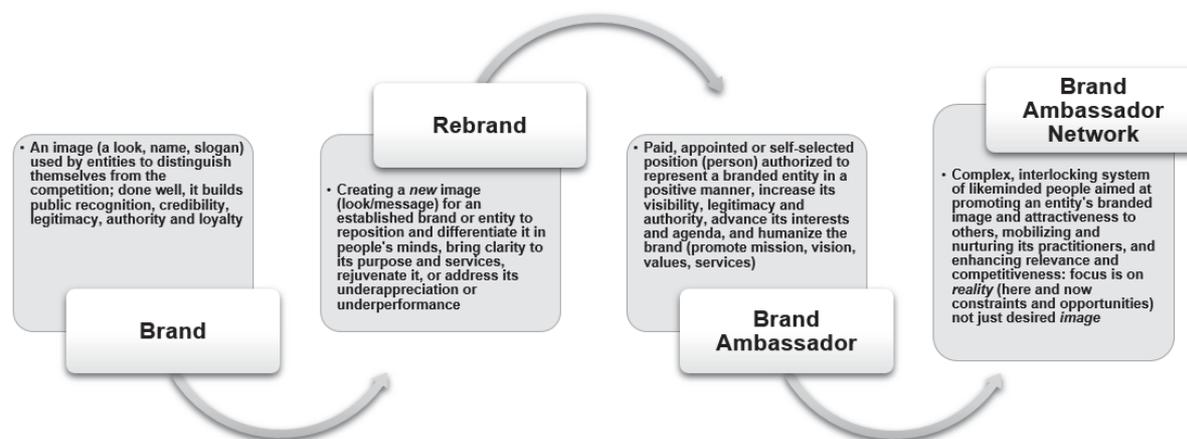


Figure 2 Main distinctions among branding, rebranding, and ambassadorship

This paper argued that it is time to entertain a different, additional strategy. Ambassadors are on a mission to work on behalf of the profession in ways more substantial than tweaking images (i.e., branding and rebranding). They know that rhetoric (persuasive and effective communication), dialogue (coming to common understandings), and diplomacy (skill and tact dealing with recalcitrant or misguided people) is needed. To make this happen, home economists are encouraged to consider the newer ideas of brand ambassadorships and brand ambassador networks.

These two approaches focus on our reality (i.e., here and now constraints and opportunities) and how that reality necessitates different messaging that privileges legitimacy, recognized authority and relevancy over name and logo, assuming the latter are means not ends. Ambassadors would appreciate that the home economics profession's reputation, respect and status, indeed its very existence, hinges on forceful, convincing and sustained messaging of our differentiated, powerful contributions to society. An artful and strategic blend of branding, rebranding and ambassadorship is proposed as an important strategy for future proofing the profession and discipline.

Biography

Sue L. T. McGregor (PhD, IPHE, and Professor Emerita) is a Canadian home economist (nearly 50 years) retired from Mount Saint Vincent University. She has a keen interest in home economics philosophy and leadership (along with consumer studies, transdisciplinarity, and research paradigms and methodologies). Sue is the recipient of Kappa Omicron Nu's (KON) Marjorie M. Brown Distinguished Professor Award (for home economics leadership), and is Docent in Home Economics at the University of Helsinki. With Donna Pendergast (Australia) and Kaija Turkki (Finland), she co-edited (2012) *The Next 100 years: Creating Home Economics Futures*. She published *Understanding and Evaluating Research* (SAGE) in 2018. Her home economics scholarship is at www.consultmcmgregor.com.

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