

Leadership Engagement among Female Undergraduates

(Penglibatan Kepimpinan dalam Kalangan Mahasiswi)

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ABSTRACT

The role of a student leader at university is all-encompassing. The experience exposes students to different soft skills from communicating and working together with friends across ethnics and nationalities, to organizing events for and with peers, lecturers and the public. Despite this 'rich' surrounding promising personal development and recommendation for future employability, we still hear of undergraduates who are reluctant to assume leadership roles while at university. This study explores the potential factors that may be associated with reported lack of interest and participation in student leadership among female undergraduates. A survey research was conducted among female undergraduates residing at the on-campus accommodation. Results show that at least half of the female undergraduate cohort understand the importance of student leadership experience and have held at least one leadership position. Further, the study depicts some prevailing reasons for lack of involvement and nonparticipation in student leadership for the rest of the female undergraduate cohort.

Keywords: Student Leadership; Student Development; Female Undergraduates

ABSTRAK

Peranan pemimpin pelajar di universiti meliputi banyak perkara. Pengalaman ini mendedahkan pelajar kepada kemahiran insaniah yang berbeza daripada berkomunikasi dan bekerja bersama-sama dengan rakan-rakan semua etnik dan bangsa, menganjurkan acara dan dengan rakan sebaya, pensyarah dan anggota masyarakat. Walaupun persekitaran yang 'kaya' ini menjanjikan pembangunan keperibadian dan kebolehpasaran yang baik, kita masih mendengar adanya mahasiswa yang keberatan memainkan peranan dalam kepimpinan sewaktu berada di universiti. Kajian ini meneroka faktor yang mungkin boleh dikaitkan dengan kekurangan minat dan penyertaan yang dilaporkan dalam kepimpinan pelajar dalam kalangan pelajar wanita. Satu soal selidik telah dijalankan dalam

kalangan pelajar wanita yang tinggal di kampus. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan sekurang-kurangnya separuh daripada mereka memahami pentingnya pengalaman dalam kepimpinan pelajar dan pernah menduduki sekurang-kurangnya satu jawatan dalam kepimpinan. Kajian ini juga menggambarkan beberapa sebab lazim yang menyebabkan kurangnya penglibatan pelajar wanita dalam kepimpinan.

Kata kunci: Kepimpinan pelajar; Pembangunan Pelajar, Mahasiswi

INTRODUCTION

When undergraduates involve themselves actively in student activities, it becomes a good training ground for them to develop their talent and potential as student leaders and hold various posts and responsibilities. They will meet a lot of people from all walks of life: peers, lecturers, sponsors, not forgetting models from organizations and industry to emulate. Incidentally, the undergraduates shall acquire essential skills and experience in collaborating with others and develop resilience as well as employability-related behaviours and characteristics. In Malaysia, this notion on nurturing future leaders among undergraduates is much endorsed by researchers (Ab. Rahim & Shamsiah, 2004; Quah et al., 2009) and has become a national agenda. In fact, the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) emphasizes on eight domains of learning outcomes for Malaysians, and this includes '*leadership– having the vision to lead in carrying out tasks*'. This study sheds some light on leadership engagement among female undergraduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hogan, Curphy and Hogan (1994) advance a team-based and human-related definition of leadership. To them, "The ends of leadership involve getting results through others, and the means of leadership involve the ability to build cohesive, goal-oriented teams". Further, almost anybody can become a leader and he shall continue to learn from coaching, observation and hands-on experience. Here, an infamous quotation by John F. Kennedy is most appropriate: "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other". On this note, the university serves as a good training ground to nurture future leaders of the nation. Given the conducive, intellectual community and positive learning environment, leadership skills and talent can be developed further via on-campus activities as well as community-based projects.

UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Involvement in campus activities can promote self-empowerment among undergraduates. According to Yukl (2010), 'empowerment' is a salient concept that explains effective leadership. It involves "autonomy, shared responsibility and influence in making important decisions". Positioning this concept within the university setting relates to a simulation of real-life challenge in organizations and the workplace. According to Astin (1999), a student can be illustrated as a 'highly involved student' when he "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students". It has been observed that this type of students will graduate as wholesome individuals, who may flaunt high scores and much-envied CGPA. Also, it becomes their priority to include involvement in clubs and societies, as well as achievements in self-actualization and self-development, as their goals and aspiration.

In a study carried out by researchers from University Putra Malaysia on student leadership characteristics, Ab. Rahim and Shamsiah (2004) discovered that "students who were active felt that they possess leadership characteristics needed to function compared to those who were less active". Also, participation in activities organized by clubs and societies has been found to correlate with adult leadership. Hence, it is hoped that universities could become more active in encouraging undergraduates to organize activities and continue to develop leadership knowledge, skills and potential among undergraduates.

In UNITEN where this study is carried out, there exists a special committee called UNITEN Student Development and Implementation Committee (USDIC) which ensures that the university provides platforms and opportunities for undergraduates to develop their ability, talent and interest. Here, student involvement is shaped by five pillars of student development categories namely Spiritual and Civilization, Art and Culture, Sports and Recreation, Academic and Leadership as well as Communication and Entrepreneurship. At the end of their Foundation or degree study, undergraduates should fulfill all these baskets which are the pre-requisites for graduation. Leadership roles like project directors and heads of bureaus contribute significantly to the cumulative points which indirectly empower undergraduates to accept and explore their leadership potential and talent.

A recent study conducted in Malaysia's public as well as private higher institutions reveals that there are 3 different factors that encourage undergraduates to lead which include age, organizational factor such as private universities and public universities, as well as different cluster of studies. It is discovered that younger undergraduates have higher tendency to become a leader in comparison with those who are about to graduate. Those who are taking social science majors

such as Political Studies are more motivated to become a leader compared with Science and Information Technology students (Jamaliah and Krauss, 2010). This study will examine the interest among female undergraduates in assuming leadership roles at university.

NURTURING LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES

Leadership is learned over time through interaction with others (Ab. Rahim and Shamsiah, 2004). Accordingly, an individual can be trained and his leadership traits can be developed and enhanced via leadership programs and leadership experience. However, Bett et al. (2008) proposed the prevailing philosophy: ‘leaders are born’ instead of ‘leaders are made’. This has imposed a serious caution in all efforts to develop leaders among undergraduates.

This study holds on to the notion that undergraduates should be made to understand that leadership skills and abilities can be developed to some extent. Further, the university setting provides a conducive, learning environment to develop knowledge and skills in leadership. As undergraduates undertake and experience the challenge and responsibilities as leaders, they will learn beyond the boundaries of their classroom and curriculum.

The question asked at this juncture would be: What are some essential leadership criteria that should exist among our undergraduates? On this note, researchers are in agreement that these values are common values that are naturally present in every individual. In fact, leadership qualities are naturally manifested even outside of formal leadership positions. Hughes *et. al* (2006) emphasize that good leadership ‘involves both rational and emotional sides of human experience’. Along this vine, Yukl (2010) has captured several characteristics that may be anticipated of leaders. Perhaps, this can be used as a guideline or yardstick for undergraduates to aspire and universities to nurture among the younger generation–future leaders of the nation. Table 1 summarizes the leader characteristics and attributes.

TABLE 1. Cultural Beliefs about Ideal Leader Attributes (Yukl, 2010)

RATED EFFECTIVE IN MOST CULTURES	RATINGS VARIED ACROSS CULTURES
Visionary	Ambitious
Decisive	Cautious
Dynamic	Compassionate
Dependable	Domineering

Encouraging and positive	Formal
Excellence-oriented	Humble (self-effacing)
Honest and trustworthy	Independent
Skilled administrator	Risk taker
Team integrator	Self-sacrificing

Professor Glenn Omatsu (n.d.) from California State University reiterates on the role of leadership skills in nurturing the knowledge, skills and personality of undergraduates. In his booklet entitled “Student Leadership Training Booklet”, he emphasizes that leadership skills is indeed the priority factor in hiring; furthermore, it equips undergraduates with the necessary skills to ‘help their communities’. Most strikingly, he defines leadership as ‘the ability to work well with other people’, as observed in the common practice among community groups and companies.

In a recent study on employability criteria among Malaysian graduates, Quah et al. (2009) reported that local graduates, as compared to foreign graduates, are still lacking in several generic skills like leadership, communication and innovation. More importantly, they reported that leadership is included as a generic skill much sought by employers of graduate employees. This demonstrates the importance of nurturing leadership skills among our undergraduates, on top of other essential soft skills like communication, teamwork and ICT. Given the daunting local employability scenario, tertiary institutions nowadays regard leadership encouragement and development as quintessential, as illustrated in the curriculum, co-curricular activities as well as mission statements of various student-related departments. For instance, in UNITEN, the Student Affairs Centre (SAC) aims toward “Nurturing future graduates with universal values and skills that prepare them for a lifetime success” with its tagline – “*Nurturing Future Leaders*”.

Finally, with much emphasis on developing leaders among our undergraduates, academicians, university staff and researchers should collaborate and rigorously evaluate undergraduates’ response to this emerging demand on leadership knowledge, skills and experience. It will be useful to understand their level of acceptance, readiness and willingness to involve and empower themselves with leadership skills as it prepares them to serve the communities as well as future employability. Indeed, this study will highlight on the response to student leadership among undergraduates residing at one of UNITEN residential apartments. It delves into their interest as well as readiness to assume any form of leadership roles as undergraduates.

METHODOLOGY

This study involves a non-experimental design and is targeted toward female undergraduates residing at Kelompok MURNI, students' apartments at Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN). It employs the survey research methodology, which is probably 'the single most widely used research type in educational research' (Wiersma, 2000). As mentioned by Wiersma (2000), survey research is a useful means of collecting data to measure and analyze attitudes, opinions or achievements. The survey, using a self-administered questionnaire was randomly distributed to the undergraduates. To elicit meaningful interpretations of the possible reasons for undergraduates' involvement in student leadership, the survey also includes open-ended items. Here, the responses were categorized via construction of category systems based on content analysis and coding - translation of data.

Kelompok MURNI is chosen particularly because of its continuous initiative to organize student activities at kelompok, university as well as national levels. All the activities are organized by the *MURNI Students' Society* which obtains funding from the Student Affairs Centre. In cases where the allocation is deemed insufficient, the committee shall embark on sponsorship in cash, kind or service. Hence, the female undergraduates residing at kelompok MURNI are presented with ample opportunities to become student leaders for the student projects, by assuming top posts as project directors and assistant directors, or heads of bureaus. Among the activities carried out include the national public speaking competition, national river clean-up, Hajj- the Muslim's pilgrimage, employability seminar, etc. In 2011/12, Kelompok MURNI won the *best student society award* as an acknowledgement for the students' concerted effort in conducting various activities that contribute to student development and more conducive living climate on campus. Kelompok MURNI is an on-campus accommodation for female undergraduates. For the purpose of this study, '*kelompok*' is referred to as '*hostel*' which is a more common in Malaysia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 400 surveys were distributed to undergraduates residing at Kelompok MURNI, a female students' residential apartments at Universiti Tenaga Nasional. Return rate was 40.75% (N=163). Participation was voluntary. Response received was not very satisfactory, but deemed adequate to provide a picture of the current opinion and attitude among undergraduates involved in the study. Figure 1 below depicts the demography of respondents in the study.

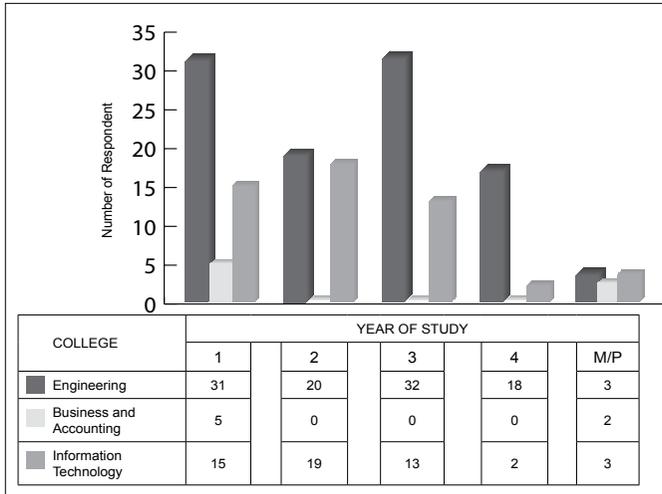


FIGURE 1: Number of Respondents according to Years of Study and Major

Figure 1 indicates the total number of respondents participating in the survey. The highest response according to year of study was received from Year 1 (N=51) followed by Year 3 (N=45). Majority of the respondents (63.80%) are from the College of Engineering.

DO UNDERGRADUATES AGREE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT?

Figure 2 below presents feedback from the undergraduates with regard to the importance of student leadership.

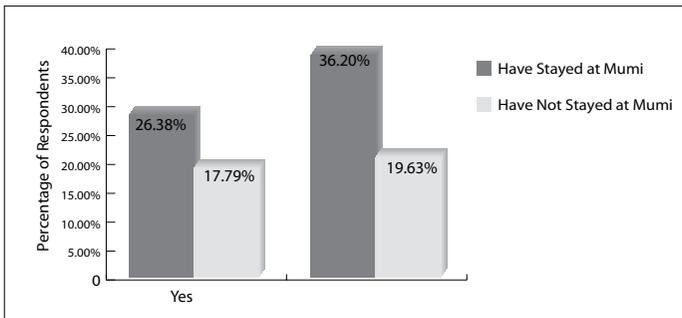


FIGURE 2: Importance of student leadership experience

Results indicate that 55.83% (N=91) of the respondents do not regard leadership involvement as an important experience. This includes undergraduates who have stayed at the hostel and those without hostel experience. Another 44.17% of the respondents in this study acknowledge the significance of leadership experience while studying at university.

DOES THE CURRENT STUDENT POPULATION HAVE THE NECESSARY LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE?

Figure 2 below presents feedback regarding leadership experience among the respondents.

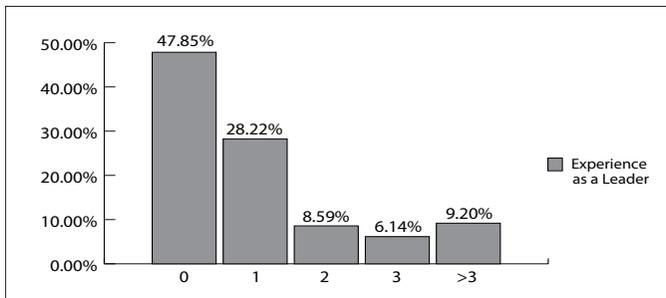


FIGURE 3: Frequency of Student Leadership Experience

Based on the findings, 47.85% of the respondents do not have any leadership experience while studying at the university. It shows that almost half of the current student population still does not have the experience holding any type of leadership posts while studying at UNITEN. Given a wide range of clubs and societies at the university with the annual and ad-hoc activities, it is rather surprising that the respondents still have not held any leadership posts and responsibilities.

ARE THE STUDENTS INTERESTED TO BECOME STUDENT LEADERS AT KELOMPOK MURNI?

In order to delve further into female undergraduates’ leadership engagement, we asked if the respondents would like to become student leaders at kelompok MURNI for the current semester. Figure 4 below depicts a worrying trend among the current student population with regard to student leadership.

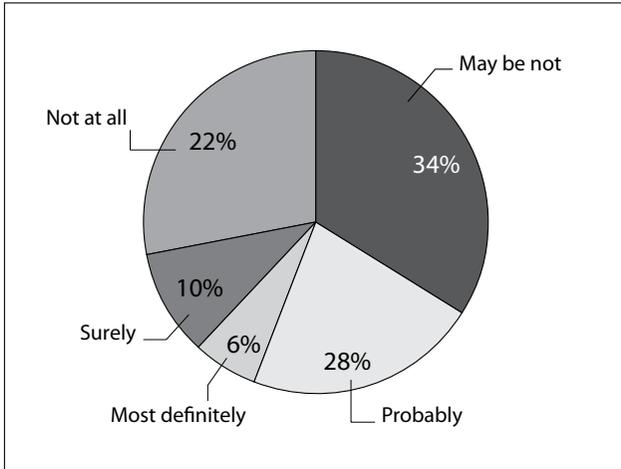


FIGURE 4: Inclination to be involved as MURNI student leaders

Figure 4 shows that only 44.17% (N=72) are interested to become student leaders at Kelompok MURNI. A bigger portion of the respondents, 55.83% (N=91) are not inclined to assume any of the leadership roles made available at the hostel via activities conducted by the students' society. In view of this response which raises serious concerns and curiosity, the open-ended responses of those who have expressed a negative response to this item were analyzed using content analysis and coding. The results are discussed in the following section.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR STUDENTS' LACK OF INTEREST IN BECOMING STUDENT LEADERS AT KELOMPOK MURNI?

Based on the results, there were several overriding themes describing the lack of interest among female undergraduates in assuming leadership roles at the students' hostel. The findings are enlightening as well as intriguing. Based on the open-ended responses, three main categories have emerged as substantial reasons validating students' lack of interest in student leadership involvement at the hostel. This is represented in the pyramid illustrated in Figure 5.

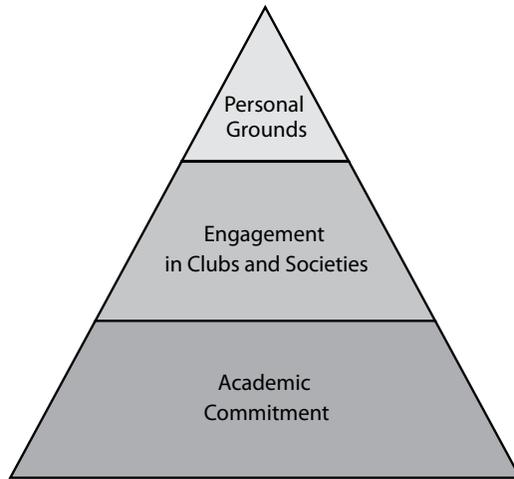


FIGURE 5: Reasons for Lack of Interest in Student Leadership among Female Undergraduates

Figure 5 above depicts the three levels of the pyramid which represent three categories of reasons given by the female undergraduate cohort for not involving themselves in leadership experience for the current semester.

ACADEMIC COMMITMENT

At the base of the pyramid is the most quoted reason given by the female undergraduate cohort for not involving themselves in student leadership experience at the hostel. Here, academic commitment entails class hours, assignments as well as preparation for academic coursework. Nowadays, most university courses include project work and assignments as cumulative types of evaluations. This makes coping with the academic course a difficult task for some undergraduates. They are not merely reading subjects, but require some time outside class hours for group discussions and research meetings and visits. Hence, most undergraduates may feel too occupied with their commitment to studies until they can't make time for leadership experience which demands another portion of commitment. This notion is expressed in the following quotes:

- “A lot of coursework”.
- “Studies are hectic enough”.
- “Very busy with academic study”.

Further, there's the tendency for undergraduates to opt for student hostels primarily to stay away from distractions like movies, shopping sprees, parties, etc. As it is common among their age group, many undergraduates would spend their leisure with friends, and fun-time becomes the priority. Nevertheless, if they stay at the hostel, they are still within the scholarly climate of the university. If the undergraduates want to leave the hostels to go to the movies or so, they will have to abide by the curfew hours and seek permissions from the hostel administrators.

Further, living environment at the hostel is conducive for learning because the surrounding is clean, peaceful and comfortable. This enables undergraduates to focus on their studies and assignments i.e. final year projects. The following quotes describe the undergraduates' intention to make the most of the conducive living environment at the hostel to concentrate on their studies.

"I would like to focus more on my study since this semester I took a lot of reading subjects".

"I'm in my final year, so my priority is to my project and aim to succeed".

"I'm in final year currently and have to focus on my final year project".

In short, the base of the pyramid illustrates the firm decisions among the female undergraduate cohort to focus on their studies. Involving themselves in student leadership may interfere with their concentration.

ENGAGEMENT IN CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

Besides academic commitment, female undergraduates do not involve themselves as student leaders at the hostel because they are occupied with other club and society responsibilities. As stated in the university handbook, students are encouraged to join clubs and societies to gain maximum benefits from activities beyond their classrooms. Further, some clubs are affiliations to professional bodies which are advisable for their future. The following comments reflect the undergraduates' involvement in other clubs and societies until they can't make time for student leadership at the hostel.

"Already committed myself in so many societies. Example: Career Unit, Techflow, badminton, and SIR where I am carrying a post in all these society".

"Because right now I'm the secretary of and we have weekly meetings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays".

"Because I'm already holding several major responsibilities in clubs as well as coursework".

The second level of the pyramid represents the voices of the female undergraduate cohort who are already actively involved with student leadership experience on campus. Nevertheless, this study extends its focus on the importance of also assuming student leadership responsibilities at the hostel where the female undergraduates reside.

In short, undergraduates should also discern the importance of contributing to a conducive, living climate at the hostel, a place where they take a break after one hectic day of lecture and spend their weekends. If they could balance their leadership involvement between clubs/ societies and hostel responsibilities, they may find the living experience at the hostel more rewarding and satisfying.

PERSONAL GROUNDS

The pinnacle of the pyramid reflects some personal reasons given by the respondents to explain their lack of involvement in leadership experience at the students' hostel. Generally, this dimension can be further categorized into two types of contact zones:

UNTOUCHABLE CONTACT ZONE

In this category, undergraduates will have no time to be involved in any type of leadership activities conducted at the hostel. Some students stay at the hostel only during weekdays and return home to take care of elderly parents or younger siblings at weekends. These reasons are personal; hence, it's best not to interfere with their privacy. Some undergraduates have to do part-time jobs to pay for their study fees and send some money to the family. The following quotes exemplify some reasons in this category:

"I'm working in Cyberjaya".

"Every weekend, I'll go back home".

"I'm afraid I can't attend the meeting due to some reasons".

In short, undergraduates in this zone may not have a choice to think of involving themselves in student leadership while studying at the university, and staying at the hostel.

POTENTIAL CONTACT ZONE

In this category, undergraduates express some degree of indecisiveness, lack of confidence and zero-leadership experience. Some may be curious about the

common responsibilities and benefits that entail with the students leadership experience. The following quotes exemplify this category:

“I can’t manage both studies and becoming a student leader”.

“Not sure whether I can handle that or not”.

“Not enough time”.

“I don’t have any characteristic as a leader, I’m too shy, I don’t like to be in a crowd”.

“I don’t have any experience”.

To conclude, undergraduates who belong to the ‘potential contact zone’ category is a promising pool of undergraduates who may be invited to join the student leadership circle. With adequate motivation, appropriate strategy and planning, undergraduate talents can be tapped and more undergraduates like this can be encouraged to become student leader.

CONCLUSION

Results show that at least half of the female undergraduate cohort is already actively involved in student leadership experience. Further, almost half of them realize the significance of student leadership experience at university. Nevertheless, only 44.7% of the female undergraduates in this study expressed interest to become student leaders at the hostel. Several factors contribute to their unwillingness to become student leaders at the hostel. This phenomenon is reflected in this study via three distinctive dimensions: personal grounds, engagement in other clubs and societies, and commitment toward achieving academic excellence.

To conclude, it is wise to focus on motivating the female undergraduate cohort that makes 53.3% who show lack of interest in student leadership involvement at the hostel and prepare some leadership prospects which may appeal to this group. Even if some academic and personal reasons entail, there is still a portion of future leaders in the category of ‘*potential contact zone*’ waiting to be invited and nurtured to assume the leadership responsibilities. As the study reveals, they may lack some knowledge, skills and self-esteem to become student leaders at present. With adequate grooming, they shall be more confident and we shall have more female undergraduates contributing to the pool of student leaders at university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. More workshops and projects should be conducted to train female undergraduates in leadership, also to enhance and boost their self-confidence.

2. In order to promote leadership involvement among undergraduates, experts have advocated for the intention to move away from traditional leadership to a more modern approach called ‘shared leadership’. According to Yukl (2010), ‘shared leadership’ is a non-traditional form of leadership that encourages teamwork.
3. Further studies should be conducted to enhance the pyramid (personal grounds, engagement in clubs and societies, academic commitment) as proposed in this study.
4. Finally, this study invites further investigation via correlational studies in order to extend the discussion and impact of student leadership at institutes of higher learning.

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