
THE ORTHODOX IDENTIFICATION IN A DIGITAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of the digital era on Orthodox religious identity. It focuses on how online environments, particularly Orthodox-centred websites, influence the self-perception and identification of Orthodox believers compared to secular individuals. The study utilizes qualitative research methods, including in-depth analysis of social networks and Orthodox websites. It aims to understand how digital environments shape religious identities, focusing on both the reinforcing and distorting effects of online content. On one hand, the internet serves as a tool for strengthening religious identity among Orthodox believers, providing a space for community, learning and expression. On the other hand, it presents significant challenges. The prevalence of misinformation and the transformation of traditional religious values in the digital sphere lead to a more fluid and potentially distorted understanding of religious identity. This dual effect creates a paradox where the digital world is both a facilitator and a disruptor of religious identity. The study concludes by emphasizing the nuanced role of digitalization in shaping Orthodox identity. It points out that while digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for religious engagement and community building, they also pose risks that can lead to a dilution or misinterpretation of traditional religious values. The research underscores the need for a critical understanding of how digitalization intersects with religious life, highlighting the importance of navigating these digital spaces thoughtfully to maintain the integrity of Orthodox religious identity in the modern world.

Keywords: self-identification, person, Orthodox, Internet, social networks

1. Introduction

The development of information technologies and new media contributed to a significant transformation of society, expressed in the latent transformation of personality identification. These factors affected the work of the Church with members of society (believers and nonbelievers), aimed at the social identification of a person in the modern world [1].

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Since the end of the 20th century, the topic of religious identification has attracted increasing interest from scientists. Many authors were concerned that contemporary researchers either neglected the significance of religious identity for society or that religious identity was studied itself superficially. Reproaching sociologists who adhere to the theory of the secularization of society for predicting the death of religion argued, “Religion... provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of identity as an integral part of a broader collectivity of individuals who share similar beliefs and who have, to some extent, a common history and a collective fate” [2]. Concern that not only sociologists but also psychologists ignore the study of religious identity is expressed by Palitsky, Sullivan, Young and Schmitt [3].

S. Myers, H.A. Syrdal, R.V. Mahto and S.S. Sen studied social networks in terms of religious identity [4]. The researchers found that mentioning God’s name serves as a symbolic signal that prompts involvement with Christian influencers’ content across various social media platforms studied. This could be attributed to followers being drawn to these influencers because of their Christian identity. Consequently, followers anticipate receiving content that is both informative and inspirational, centred around their faith in God. Such content fosters a sense of shared values and beliefs among followers and the influencer.

While scientists in different countries try to move beyond authoritative judgments and the tools for measuring religious identity created based on such judgments, Russian scientists are busier searching for identity as a model of a nation. A.V. Lubsky believes that for Russia, such a model can be the formation of a “trans-ethnic nation-civilization” [5] and the construction of a civilizational identity as the basis for the consolidation of Russian society as a local historical entity that has a time-proven ability to interiorize and express universal ideas and values through the prism of its own historical experience.

A.S. Panarin devoted his research to the study of Orthodox civilization [6]. To understand what processes of transformation of Orthodox identification are taking place, it is necessary to comprehend the whole path of development of Orthodox civilization.

It should be noted that Russian scientists not only are immersed in an awareness of the identity of Orthodoxy but are also attentive to the work of foreign scientists. A.G. Busygin, based on the teachings of Berger & Lukman [7] and Bauman [8], equates the formation of religious identity with the process of socialization [9]. According to him, “the process of religious identity formation always begins with one of two possible starting points: 1) birth and childhood in a religious family, when religious socialization coincides with primary socialization; 2) acquaintance with religion outside the institution of the family, at school, university, work - secondary socialization” [9, p. 58].

What is the difference between the tools for identifying and self-identifying a secular person and Orthodox believers? Such tools for a secular person are social values, ideals and goals of life, which should be achieved in the opinion of the majority of people in this society. For Orthodox people, the

“divine fullness of being” often turns out to be the highest cultural value and often even dominates the individual being of the subjects [10, p. 85].

Therefore, identification for Orthodox people consists of two levels: the first is associated with the assimilation of their inherent properties, standards, values, social attitudes and roles; the second is associated with the achievement of the main goal of the life of an Orthodox person - communion with God. At the first level, social values and roles, rituals and norms of Church life are mixed. This is the outer side of Orthodox patterns. At the second level of sensory sense is the feeling of faith as an inner experience, saying “what is inexpressible, what can only be experienced and ultimately rests in contemplative silence” [11].

The personal experience of communion with God is based on the phenomenon of ‘revelation’. The word ‘revelation’ means God’s supernatural revelation of unknowable truths to people. Speaking about the phenomenon of ‘revelation’, Ivan Andreev says that “in addition to the conviction in the existence of God, a person also desires personal communication with Him. Religion begins not with the recognition of God (this is, strictly speaking, the task of Philosophy) but with communion with Him. This communion between man and God is impossible without the help of God. It is this help that the so-called supernatural revelation provides.” [12]

Personal experiences with God are inherently individual and cannot be directly transferred to another person in their entirety. In addition, the very content of communion with God has a different immersion. Most believers can usually share facts when God has helped them and warned them. However, in gaining the experience of communion with God, it is not so much His gifts that are important as concentrating on God Himself or on His Person. Archpriest Simeon defined experience and Scripture as the sources of knowledge of God when a person draws “one from the Divine Scriptures, the other from experience itself” [Archbishop Vasil (Krivoshein), *Venerable Simeon the New Theologian*, https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij_Krivoshein/prepodobnyj-simeon-novyj-bogo-slov/3_2, accessed on 2.10.2023].

As Basil the Great said, “For I became more than doubled, having enjoyed what was written, because I could really see your very soul reflected in the words, as if in some kind of mirror” [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij_Velikij/pisma/160]. Thus, it is impossible to obtain the experience of communion with God without reading the Divine Scriptures; at the same time, simply reading them does not give an experience of communion with God.

In the digital era, the definition of religious affiliation, participation and identity can significantly diverge from traditional metrics, emphasizing the importance of examining how individuals express and experience their Orthodoxy online. The aim of this study was to explore and understand how Orthodox religious identity is influenced and shaped by the digital landscape, particularly in the context of the internet and Orthodox-oriented websites. The study aims to examine the differences in identification and self-identification between secular individuals and Orthodox believers, focusing on the role of

digital platforms in either reinforcing or transforming religious identity. It seeks to assess both the positive and negative impacts of the digital age on the traditional values and practices of Orthodox believers, offering insights into how digitalization is affecting religious identity in modern society.

2. Methodology

In our study, we focused on the identity of Orthodox people. At the present time, there is data that the number of believers is declining. According to the WCIOM, in 2017, the percentage of unbelieving Russians doubled compared to that in the previous five years, from 7 to 14%. The number of people who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians is decreasing: 66% of Russians identify themselves as such. According to WCIOM, the number of Orthodox believers is continuing to decline [WCIOM, *The Orthodox Faith and the Sacrament of Baptism*, August 14, 2019, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/pravoslavnyaya-vera-i-tainstvo-kreshcheniya>, accessed on 2.10.2023]. Sixty-three percent of Russians declared their adherence to Orthodoxy. At the same time, most of these numbers are not churchgoing. Their self-identification is built on the basis of cultural and historical memory. Such people “do not so much believe in God as they want to believe in him” [13, p. 63].

We should emphasize that our study adopts a comprehensive approach to Orthodox identity, recognizing its diverse and complex nature, particularly in the digital era. Our research explores how individuals engage with Orthodox beliefs and practices on digital platforms, which might diverge from conventional participation in parish activities or adherence to formal religious organizations. Furthermore, it's critical to acknowledge the intricate and nuanced landscape of Orthodox Christianity within the Russian Federation. While official records from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) indicate that there are at least eight religious organizations officially registered in Russia [Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), *Number of religious organizations, registered in the Russian Federation, as of January 1, 2015*, https://rosstat.gov.ru/bgd/regl/b15_11/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/11-03.htm, accessed on 2.10.2023], discussions about the Orthodox Church often primarily reference the Russian Orthodox Church. This observation underscores the need to navigate carefully the broader spectrum of Orthodox Christianity in Russia, acknowledging both its official and lived expressions as we examine its transformation in the context of digital influence.

Qualitative research methods were employed to analyse the impact of the digital landscape on Orthodox religious identity. This included the analysis of social networks and Orthodox-oriented websites, which provided insights into how online platforms influence the self-perception and identification of Orthodox believers. These methods allowed for an in-depth understanding of the interplay between digital content and religious identity, highlighting both the

reinforcing and distorting effects of the internet on traditional religious values and beliefs.

3. Research results and discussion

When performing church rituals such as reading prayers, it is necessary to have the right to identify with Orthodoxy, which we classified as the first social level of assimilation of inherent Orthodox characteristics, standards, values, social attitudes and roles. An Orthodox person is a member of the Orthodox civilization. Thus, its identity reflects the characteristics of Orthodox civilizational identity. According to the definition given by Russian scientists, “Civilization identity is a multi-layered sociocultural self-determination of various population groups in relation to the forms of modernity of their life, collective experience, solidarity, and their practices” [14, p. 286].

The construction of collective identity, as S. Eisenstadt noted, is influenced by special codes or themes rooted in the cultural preconditions of a civilizational complex. The code of sacredness, or transcendence, links the construction of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to the special relation of the collective subject to the sphere of the sacred and sublime, be it ‘god’, ‘mind’, ‘progress’ or ‘rationality’ [15]. In Orthodoxy, the code of transcendence is formed only through the acceptance of God and influenced by the formation of personal experiences of communication with God. In Orthodoxy, knowledge of the mind refers to carnal knowledge. “We find two meanings signified by the word truth. One is the comprehension of what leads to a blessed life, and the other is the right knowledge about whatever of the things of this world. The truth, which contributes to salvation, is in the pure heart of the perfect man, who says it to his neighbor without guile; and if we do not know the truth about the earth and the sea, about the stars and their motion and speed, this will not prevent us from receiving the promised bliss.” [Saint Basil the Great, *Discourse on the 14th Psalm 3: 3II 29, 256BC*, https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij_Velikij/Besedi/14, accessed on 2.10.2023] Civilizational identity is based on cultural and religious factors, in the historical global aspect, existential and transcendent perceptions and values. Historically, Orthodoxy has been considered a civilization. Historically, the world structure of the Orthodox Church has been represented by autocephalous Churches. “The current understanding of Church autocephaly assumes that each Church is independent not only from other autocephalous Churches but also from external factors, that is, it is an autonomous religious organization.” [10, p. 76] Nevertheless, the value of communion with God that we have highlighted remains a distinctive feature of all autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

The depth to which God’s truth is embraced significantly influences the unity and solidarity within the Orthodox community. While sharing spiritual experiences plays a vital role in inspiring and influencing others within the community, it is crucial not to overlook the uniqueness of individual spiritual journeys. Traditional learning mechanisms may fall short in capturing the

essence of these deeply personal experiences. Instead, the strength of the Orthodox community's unity is fostered by a collective aspiration for a deeper communion with God, transcending the realms of secular morality and law. If some believers have experience communicating with God, this instils a sense of belonging to others. Belonging consists of two realities, the actual experienced reality and the belonging reality, which have potential characteristics [16]. The potential nature of belonging reality is that it has an attractive force and acts as a tool for recognizing another's experience of communion with God and unity in anticipation of each believer's acquiring that experience. A sense of belonging is what helps unite believers in this endeavour. Belonging is a tool for unity, rallying on a sensual level of acceptance by believers. Belonging helps individuals immerse themselves in the sacredness of the Eucharist.

The civilizational identity of modern societies was embedded in a new situation of socioeconomic, political and cultural turbulence at the beginning of the 21st century [16, 17]. The rapid development of IT and artificial intelligence has contributed to the formation of a digital society. Digital society is not only the development of modern communication technologies but also a change in the attributes of sociality, for example, the transfer of a significant part of social interactions and relationships to virtual space and the emergence of new nonhuman subjects of interactions, such as bots [18]. Hybridity, as a classifying feature of modern society, is the interpenetration of the virtual and real worlds [18]. These worlds do not exist in parallel but rather interdependently. The involvement of modern people in the Internet space changes not only the format of communication but also its psychology. This "has striking resemblance to the old [primary oral cultures] in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulae" [19]. Active immersion in the virtual space of Internet networks contributes to blurring the boundaries of sociocultural secular values.

In today's world, it is customary to talk about universal human values. However, each of these values may have a different interpretation in each individual community. This is due to the specific cultural differences of societies or to the goals of social groups pursued by their leaders. These values and their interpretations are relatively stable in real life, but in social networks, their specific interpretations allow for more free formation of a set of social values, and they are mobile in their reaction to the social situation in real life. Thus, social values in a digital society are losing stability and becoming flexible, and real social values are intertwined with virtual values. The world of values becomes liquid.

O'Leary, based on the practice of the Catholic Church, notes that "As ancient religious formulae are translated into contemporary idioms, their meaning will be profoundly altered along with the mode of their reception. The old symbols will find new functional equivalents in the idioms of technological culture, and some of these will be unrecognizable to today's audiences. We must anticipate that the propositional content and presentational form of religion in the electronic communities of the future will differ greatly from its

contemporary incarnations, as the teachings of Jesus differ from the dialectical theology of the medieval Scholastics or as the Eucharistic ceremonies of the earliest Christians differ from the Latin High Mass.” [20, p. 793]

Thus, the Internet potentially predisposes individuals to the development of social networks that use religious instruments of sacralisation in addition to external imitation and acceptance of the norms, values, social attitudes and roles inherent in a particular community. These may be networks of various sects, religious fraternities, or secular networks led by a guru-leader.

The process of identification under these conditions becomes more complicated because social values, as guidelines for self-identification broadcasted in a real community and on the network, can not only differ but also come into conflict with each other. In addition, the use of sacralisation in communication processes within social networking groups contributes to alienating young people from traditional religious values.

The degree of religiosity of users of Orthodox websites can be determined through the frequency of visits to Orthodox Russian sites in accordance with their rating, analysis of the discourse on them and selected users based on their identification by web-tracking methods, and classification of the Internet audience according to the peculiarities of churching.

The website of the Moscow Patriarchate Synodal Department for Relations with Society and the Media is analysing emerging pseudo-sanctified websites [Nun Cornelia (Rees), *Once again about bias and false rumours*, August 12, 2021, http://www.ansobor.ru/news.php?news_id=10158, accessed on 2.10.2023]. Basically, the activities of unreliable Orthodox websites are related to the commercialization of religion: announcing fees for needs and building churches. On some sites, there are suggestions: Confession via Skype, Telegram, Vows and Penance, as a prototype of the ‘Diaaries of Christians’. On such sites, the real Orthodox Church and its Eucharist are being replaced with pseudo-Orthodox sacral rituals. Religious networks are also being created that use combinations of religious meanings and form communities based on the principle of unity of belief. However, at the same time, there is a deformation of Orthodoxy. As an example, we can cite sites such as ‘Bogoslov: Church of St. John the Evangelist’ [<https://bogoslov.com/about/location/>, accessed on 2.10.2023], ‘DIOLOGOS’ [<http://www.diologos.org/molitva.php>, accessed on 2.10.2023], and ‘Duhovnyj.ru’ [<https://duhovnyj.ru/>, accessed on 2.10.2023]. The website bogoslov.com is an example of a virtual Church. On the contact page, the location of the church is not indicated; moreover, it is directly stated that ‘You are a temple’. That is, everyone who comes to the site represents the church. There is no abbot of the church; only two names, priests and a clergyman, are listed. There is no description of their biographical data, places and times of ordination, or places of service in Orthodox churches. The mission of the church on the website is the mission of the worldwide church, and it does not say that it is Orthodox, although the attached photo shows an Orthodox church. The text of the so-called mission itself is a cut-up of phrases from the scriptures. The name of the site is associated with the name of active churches in

Moscow, Vyazma and other Russian cities. Saint John the Evangelist is one of the most revered apostles in Russia. Therefore, it is easy for the creators at this site to manipulate the religious identity of unchurched people. On the one hand, people seeking to join the faith are illiterate, and on the other hand, there is the vividly recognizable image of Saint John the Evangelist.

A more refined manipulation of people of faith can be found at DIOLOGOS.org. One of the most revered images of Mount Athos in the entire Orthodox world is also used. A detailed description of the monasteries, shrines and icons of Athos can be found at the site. The instructions for pilgrims are offered. The text of the Scriptures is given. However, you will not find data on priests who mediate between site visitors and the priests of Svyatogorsk monasteries. The prayer by agreement serves as an element of the virtual church. Those who visit the site are offered the following: “You do not have the opportunity to visit Mount Athos, but, you want to receive prayerful help from the Athos brothers, don’t you? We invite you to join the prayer by agreement with Athonite monks.” Behind such a beautiful facade hides a mercantile desire to collect donations. The identification of Orthodox believers is again useful as a tool for manipulation.

The next site, Duhovnyj.ru, also claims to be a virtual church. On the home page, you will find a quote from Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov: “I do not go to the church, but I believe in the soul...to all who believe in the soul, I always offer this exercise: eat in the soul, drink in the soul, marry in the soul. If you like a girl, you marry her in the soul, and that is it. In addition, you can also go to the cashier’s office for a salary in the soul... faith in the soul is no faith at all.” This quote has no reference to the source. Indeed, the Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov often spoke on the subject of “faith in the soul” [Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Odessa Eparchy, Voice of the Abode, *Another disinformation about the Russian Orthodox Church is spreading on the Internet*, March 25, 2012, http://golos-obitely.prihod.ru/category_vestnik/view/id/1117316, accessed on 2.10.2023]. However, the reference to the personality of the Archpriest Dimitry Smirnov people is not accidental. He was one of the most famous and revered priests in the Russian Orthodox community. As with previous sites, you will find neither the address of the church nor information about the priests leading this site. A wide range of speeches is offered by various people, including priests, on controversial topics that concern believers and nonbelievers. One of the signs that this is a virtual church may be that the Calendar section is completely blank, with no service hours from the Church or days of the Church holidays. There is no direct fundraising information on the website. Most likely, this approach involves the use of Orthodox for other purposes. According to the kaleidoscope of proposed plots of speech, the most likely goal is to undermine the foundations of Orthodox faith.

Thus, religion is becoming a powerful social force and, at the same time, a source of potential threats. The global network is turning into a place for mystical practices, religious rituals, and participation in sacred ceremonies [21].

The attempt to describe the activities of pseudo-Orthodox sites by the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media is very modest and does not give a complete picture. Continuous monitoring of these devices is difficult because the structure of the network is very flexible.

The website of the Moscow Patriarchate provides the most reliable information about websites containing official information about the Russian Orthodox Church, namely, documents, biographies of figures, reference data, decrees, etc. These websites include departments, commissions and committees of the Russian Orthodox Church, diocesan sites, churches, monasteries and 'specialized' educational institutions. There is a group of reference sites, such as libraries, rubricators, classifiers, catalogues, and specialized sites devoted to, say, iconography or church embroidery. However, sites with various magazines, independent network projects, Orthodox newspapers, etc., already require careful analysis. The sites of this group were conceived and implemented as a reading of analytical, artistic and journalistic, news, polemical, reference and other themes. In one form or another, such sites have 'Questions for the Priest' section. The kaleidoscopic combination of elements of different teachings taken out of context, constantly changing and renewing, creates a blurred idea of one's own religious identity and of religion in general. The problem of preserving religious identity arises [21]. In the context of identifying believers, the question arises as to what extent the information used on these sites does not distort the essence of Orthodoxy.

In our view, a group of constantly updated, fluid, 'unprofessional' sites, which are rather unreflected traces of everyday human activity and frozen in texts, requires special attention. This group can include dating sites, specialized online stores, forums, live journals and personal pages.

The Internet is becoming a means of strengthening religious identity but at the same time leading to its erosion [21]. Considering the impact of the Internet on the formation of Orthodox identity, we can speak of misinformation based on the examples above, where false or inaccurate information was deliberately intended to mislead. A religious market is being formed on the Internet; this market uses Orthodox symbols, appeals to God, and fragments of Scripture texts. All these are marketing ploys for attracting consumers to the services offered. Most often, these sites raise funds for some events that involve some kind of phantoms or for which a real event is used but the funds raised do not reach the accounts of this event. As services, it is proposed to submit notes for health, for repose, donations for candles, for certain items for the altar and donations for targeted assistance. As V.I. Ivleva notes, "The functioning of the 'religious market' in cyberspace is reflected in the following phenomena: 1) transferring missionary and cult activities of traditional religious organizations from real sociocultural space to cyberspace; 2) religious organizations use modern marketing and information technologies both to preserve traditional religious identity and to encourage religious conversion (typical for the NRD); and 3) new types of religious identity emerge: *pseudoreligious identity*, characterized by eclectic religious consciousness and

violation of confessional rules and norms, and *cyber-religious identity*, characterized by belief in so-called ‘digital’ gods” [22].

Moreover, disinformation posted on the Internet deliberately spreads through a government organization to a rival authority or the media. For example, the English-language website ‘The Moscow Times’ posted a statement by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk (Alphejev) about vaccinations. The statement was taken out of context and carefully chosen. Since Metropolitan Hilarion holds an important position in the Moscow Patriarchate (chairperson of the Department for External Church Relations), his opinion can easily be taken as an official statement of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, he is not the official speaker of the Patriarchate [Moscow Patriarchate Synodal Department for Relations with Society and the Media, *Combating abuse on the Internet*, <https://sinfo-mp.ru/borba-so-zloupotrebleniyami-v-seti-internet>, accessed on 2.10.2023].

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Odessa and Izmail Metropolis, Ishmael parish Svyato-Konstantyno-Yeleninsky, Ishmael monastery, exposed a false rumour called ‘Entrance to the temples will be paid’. Allegedly, from Easter, the Russian Orthodox Church introduces a new rule in all churches: during major Orthodox holidays, the entrance will be paid [http://golos-obitely.prihod.ru/category_vestnik/view/id/1117316]. The source of this disinformation was an article on FogNews 2012, which has since been removed.

There are certain prerequisites for creating misinformation and disinformation on the Internet:

1. A symbolic image has high power to influence the audience, but at the same time, it can be replaced by other symbols that are similar in form but different in content.
2. Work in social networks does not require special education or professional skills. In addition to purposefully creating professional disinformation, the audience, which was once the only consumer of information, has taken on the function of creating significant amounts of disinformation on a variety of topics. This explains the high level of misinformation.
3. Modern youth do not know what a primary source is or why it is necessary to refer to it to obtain reliable information; thus, the audience shows a high level of willingness to perceive misinformation information stuffing.
4. Due to the lack of preparedness for independent conclusions and because of the high level of trust in information from Internet sites, there is a need for a leader who will explain what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’.

Both misinformation and disinformation affect mass consciousness, leading to the transformation of religious identity.

4. Conclusions

The reality is that the last generation and beyond can no longer exist without the use of gadgets. Work, school, and daily life force them to be active participants in online communities. The identity and self-identity of people

increasingly depend on social values broadcast by the networks in which they are or aspire to be members.

Self-identification with Orthodox mainly depends not on the external observance of norms of behaviour but on the internal spiritual state of communion with God. Orthodox believers determine a person's affiliation with Orthodoxy on a sensory level. The sensory level of their perception develops in the process of prayer conciliarity and in the process of receiving the sacraments (confession, Eucharist, baptism) that take place directly in the Church. However, the truth of faith is measured by the personal experience of communion with God. Initiation of the experience of communion with God creates the prerequisites for unity, the emergence of a sense of solidarity.

With their achievements, digital society carries both the effect of the availability of information for Orthodox and the threat that can be expressed in the transformation of traditional religion into a secular religion convenient for the Smart Society. These destructive processes have always occurred in society. The Internet makes it possible to enhance the effect of interpretations and substitutions of traditional Orthodox values, creating their own pseudo-sacred formats of the Eucharist.

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