

# Anonymity and Group Task-Conflict in GDSS Supported Meetings

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**Abstract.** Understanding how participants of a GDSS (Group Decision Support Systems) meeting perceive anonymity is a vital issue towards improving its outcomes. This paper aims to investigate how participants of a GDSS meeting interact with the anonymity feature to generate task-conflict. Particular investigation emphasis is on the argument that the users of this system can exploit and employ technology in a way that achieves their own purposes. The strategic component of the SIDE (Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects) theory has been tested within GDSS meeting context. The paper reports on the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with experienced facilitators, technical support experts and users of these applications in real business environment settings. The two GDSS meeting applications investigated in this research are the 'FacilitatePro' and 'MeetingSphere'. The paper findings indicate that members of a GDSS anonymous environment were found to be task-focused, and that the anonymity feature plays a significant role in fostering task-conflict discussions within these meetings. SIDE's strategic component assumption that anonymous users of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) exploit and use their hidden identities to achieve personal objectives could not be found and then could not be proven. Depending on this paper's investigation, it's suggested that future research needs to investigate 'Same Time / Different Places' meeting configuration, which could provide a solution to some of the participants physical proximity concerns and may yield new findings for this type of GDSS supported meetings.

**Keywords:** Anonymity; Group Decision Support Systems; Task-Conflict; Strategic Component of the SIDE Theory.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A GDSS is "an interactive computer-based information system which combines the capabilities of communication technologies, database technologies, computer technologies, and decision technologies to support the identification, analysis, formulation, evaluation and solution of semistructured or unstructured problems by a group in a user-friendly computing environment" (Er and Ng, 1995, cited in Fan *et al.*, 2007: 816), where group members gather around a discussion conference table, each group member has his own computer terminal linked to other terminals by a computer network. The meeting is guided by a facilitator; who holds the duties of running the session, categorizing and prioritizing the questions and the suggested solutions by the meeting members. Participants' comments, contributions and other meeting procedures appear, anonymously, on each members screen and/or on a shared large display screen fitted at the front of the participants (DeSanctis *et al.*, 2008; Sweeney *et al.*, 1997 cited in Klein *et al.*, 2007).

Implementing Group Decision Support System (GDSS) to support decision making process is aimed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization, and most importantly to change how groups behave (Nunamaker and Deokar, 2008), in order to bring forth more productive group meeting outcomes (DeSanctis *et al.*, 2008; Miranda and Sanders, 1995). One of the critical features the decision support systems provide is anonymity, which allows participants to exchange generated ideas anonymously (DeSanctis, 2008; Reinig and Mejias, 2003; Miranda, 1994), freeing members of the group from the influences of other high ranked or powerful individuals (Wilson *et al.*, 2010; Postmes and Spears, 2002; Dubrovsky, 1991 cited in Lee, 2005) and evaluating members' contributions and ideas based on the idea's value, not on the author's status (Jessup *et al.*, 1990).

Anonymity in GDSS supported meetings is designed to promote more open participation (McLeod, 2011; DeSanctis *et al.*, 2008), increasing the ability for strategic resistance within group members (Spears *et al.*, 2002; Coffy and Woolworth, 2004; Miranda, 1994), without the fear of criticism or retribution (Rains, 2007; Jessup *et al.*, 1990) creating an environment of constructive conflicts among meeting members (De Dreu, 2006). This type of meeting conflicts involves debate and divergent thinking related to task work issues (Behfar *et al.*, 2010; Hobman *et al.*, 2002). Group conflict has often been found to have both positive and negative effects on group performance (Souren *et al.*, 2004), efficient conflict management requires better understanding of the factors that may increase conflict within group meetings (Mooney *et al.*, 2007).

Contemporary organizations require conflict management, not conflict resolution. It doesn't mean avoidance, reduction or termination of conflict; but involves minimizing dysfunctions of it and, at the same time, emphasizing its constructive functions (Rahim, 2002). However, in the real working environment groups' performance can be, sometimes disappointing, and meeting group members often fail to be effective in decision making process (Hardman, 2009). The following section will consider abundance of research that studied anonymity and its impacts within GDSS environment.

## 2 PRIOR RESEARCH

Anonymity and its impact on GDSS supported meetings have been studied in different aspects (Christopherson, 2007). Also, significant research has been conducted to study task conflict in groups, generating controversial findings about the impact of intragroup conflict on group meetings (Kerwin *et al.*, 2011). However, yet literature on GDSS and group dynamics indicates scant interest in testing anonymity impact on group Task-Conflict in GDSS supported meetings context.

Historically, literature on anonymity in GDSS meeting context has shown controversial findings. On the one hand, findings suggest that CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) could help in avoiding dysfunctional social psychological negative impacts found in traditional forms of communication and eventually create conducive environment for participants' deliberation (Ho and McLeod, 2008). Also, anonymity enables free, open and honest idea contributions without the fear of reprisal actions and without personal or professional security concerns. In addition to that, anonymity, in GDSS meetings, is argued that it generates creative ideas (McLeod, 2011) more comments (Nunamaker *et al.*, 1997; Jessup *et al.*, 1990a), fosters better contributions and idea evaluation process (Wilson *et al.*, 2010) and reduces participants status differences (Flanagin *et al.*, 2002).

Furthermore, anonymity in GDSS was found as generating a depersonalization status, where it should not be seen as self-stereotyping, which means that individuals are different from each other, but rather as "exchangeable representatives of social identity" (Moral-Toranzo *et al.*, 2007: 1662). This status of depersonalization caused by anonymity in computer mediated meetings leads to extreme perception of group norms, more positive evaluation of

participants' arguments, directs users to focus on the task on hand (Coleman *et al.*, 1999) and drives their attention to messages being exchanged among group members (Lee, 2006).

On the other hand, a large amount of research on anonymity in Group Support System supported meetings indicated negative results (Wilson *et al.*, 2010); anonymity in GDSS meetings was found as undermining the credibility and influence of the message source (Rains, 2007), affording the opportunity to conceal or mask meeting participants' effort or lack of effort (Wilson *et al.*, 2010); and that participants become abrupt and impolite (Nunamaker *et al.*, 1988). Furthermore, in situations where groups share information in computer anonymous settings, proself-orientation group members- that is, members whose interest is limited to benefiting themselves- were found not willing to share information with the rest of the group members. While on the other hand, prosocial-orientation group members – that is, members whose interest is to contribute to the value of the group as a whole- were found willing to share information with other group members in anonymous settings (Wodzicki, *et al.*, 2011).

Behfar *et al.*, (2011) conducted three studies exploring the outcomes of process conflict within small groups. The first study tried to distinguish between the dimensions of process conflict, task conflict and relationship conflict (These three types of conflicts will be explained more in the following section). While the second study demonstrated the differences between process conflict and task conflict in a number of conflict scales. The third study explored why researchers hasn't distinguished, more reliably, between process conflict, task conflict and relationship conflict? The study findings concluded that process conflict affects negatively group performance, member satisfaction and group coordination; therefore, unresolved process conflict can result into more harmful conflict. However, the study did not link task conflict to the group performance or outcomes.

Also, Hayne *et al.*, (2003) conducted a study which engaged MBA students in laboratory settings, to examine the hypothesis of, whether comments generated anonymously by meeting participants in GDSS environment are really anonymous, and are they identifiable? Hypotheses were developed and tested to study the influences of comment length, comment evaluative tone, duration of group membership and prior communication among group members on the accuracy of attributions. The study's findings come in favor of previous studies findings of social studies, like (Postmes *et al.*, 2001; Hayne and Rice, 1997; Siegel *et al.*, 1986; Weisband *et al.*, 1995), which indicated that in many cases GDSS meeting participants were able to identify the gender and social status of the contributors. However, the research did not provide a technical solution to eliminate the attribution ability of participants within GDSS sessions.

It is clear that there has been an ascending interest in studying anonymity in different contexts of GDSS; however, exploring the impact of anonymity on task-group conflict in GDSS meeting has not been studied previously. Therefore, understanding how these technologies work, interact and how effectively it could be used is a premium (Poole, 2009).

### **3 INTRAGROUP CONFLICT AND GROUP TASK-CONFLICT**

Intragroup conflict is an inevitable conclusion of group meetings (Kerwin *et al.*, 2011). Conflict has been divided into three types of conflicts: Relationship, Process and Task. The central points of distinction among these types are the disagreement of group members and the outcome each type produces (Hobman *et al.*, 2002). Relationship conflict is the disagreements about interpersonal issues that are not task related (Jehn *et al.*, 2008), such as values, norms and personality. Process conflict is the disagreement about logistical issues; the mean to execute the task or how a task should be delegated (Jehn *et al.*, 2008; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1997). Task conflict is the disagreement about the content or the outcomes of the task, such as distribution of resources

and interpretation of facts. This kind of conflict occurs when group members discuss and debate different point of views related to the task, such as organizational hiring strategies (Mooney *et al.*, 2007; Jehn *et al.*, 2008), goals and best choice of action (Hobman *et al.*, 2002). However, this 'three type classification' has been reduced in to two types only; task and relationship conflicts, due to the difficulty of distinguishing between task and process conflicts (Behfar *et al.*, 2010).

Task conflict was found to have positive impact on group performance (De Wit *et al.*, 2011), and it is argued that, if managed properly, it enhances probing problems, creates innovative solutions (Tjosvold, 2008), increases group productivity, boosts intellectual development, increases divergent thinking and increases group decisions' quality (De Dreu and Bernard, 2008), through fostering constructive criticism of each other's ideas (Wit *et al.*, 2011; Amason, 1996 cited in Hobman *et al.*, 2002), and promoting more educated decision making (Wit *et al.*, 2011). Group members experiencing task conflict argue diverging ideas and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of different alternatives and opinions being suggested by group members, but also can be conceptualized involving debate and divergent thinking related to task work issues (Behfar *et al.*, 2010). Groups with high task-conflict tend to discuss different view points, while groups with low task-conflict do not (Behfar *et al.*, 2010).

During computer-mediated decision making sessions meeting participants are believed to focus on the task and the argument itself, rather than on the social status of who are making the argument; due to the lack of social cues that often convey personal information, such as gender, race and age, which are unrelated to the decision quality (Roach and Ayman, 2005). Thus, participants are less likely to be distracted from the major goal of their meeting or lead to biased interpretation of the meeting events (Daniel, 2007). Using the anonymous feature the GDSS meeting sessions are designed to equalize participation by reducing social cues and status differences, where possibly a few high status participants may dominate the meeting sessions; limiting discussion process and forcing other members to conform with their own attitudes. Thus, these systems enable participants to communicate based on their knowledge, freely conveying and expressing their own opinions rather than conforming to others (Daniel, 2007). Consequently, task-conflict is expected to encourage members to dissent and resist conformity pressures and engage in deep discussions, through processing task relevant information, which fosters groups' creativity and effectiveness (De Dreu, 2006).

However, findings regarding the effects of intragroup conflict on group outcomes remain inconsistent (Kerwin *et al.*, 2011). The results of De Dreu and Weingart (2003) meta analysis indicated strong and negative relation between task-conflict and team performance, with a stronger negative relation in highly complex decision making tasks. On the contrary, the results of the meta analysis conducted by De Wit *et al.* (2011) suggested that task conflict did not have a negative impact on group performance. Whether conflict fosters or hinders group innovation remains open (De Dreu, 2006). Therefore, a better understanding is needed for the interpretation of disagreement and its impact on group outcomes (Mooney *et al.*, 2007), especially in a GDSS environment while meeting participants using these applications to enhance their meeting outcomes.

#### **4 THEOROTICAL FRAMWORK**

Anonymity in GDSS meetings provides the users with the possibility to remain unidentifiable, and it is vital to understand how these technologies provide anonymity (Christopherson, 2007), and how those users utilize anonymity, strategically, to resist and dissent powerful members (Reicher *et al.*, 1995) increasing members' willingness to convey their objections, (Spears *et al.*, 2002a) then, consequently, produce more effective meeting outcomes. Unfortunately, sometimes, users of such systems do not accept these technologies' constraints. Instead, users try to attribute comments to their authors (Hayne *et al.*, 2003;

Nunamaker *et al.*, 1997), modify and adapt or exploit the available technology to suit their own needs and achieve their own goals (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994 cited in Daniel, 2007); by ‘working-around’ the system (Pollock, 2005, cited in Johnson and Deborah, 2009). Moreover, even though these technologies can foster collaborative team work, this sought after collaboration is not guaranteed due to the human factor in this process. Unfortunately, not all users are willing to work collaboratively to make these applications succeed in their endeavors (Poole, 2009). This could be due to different reasons, for example, participants with high status wishing to show their authorship (Hayne *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, many scholars provided different theories trying to explain and understand how small groups operate and behave (Pool *et al.*, 2004). From a social motive’s perspective the members of a small group can, either, predominantly focus on the outcomes and interest of the group as a whole, or, they may focus on their own interests. These social motives have been discussed to have a critical influence on the way in which conflicts in groups are managed (De Dreu *et al.*, 2000). However, among many theories that tried to explain how group members behave in an anonymous environment, this paper investigates, the SIDE theory which is, arguably, is the most current and influential theory in terms of anonymity and group members interpersonal interaction (Christopherson, 2007).

#### **4.1 General View of the SIDE Theory**

The Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) came out, as an alternative for the Deindividuation Theory (Reicher *et al.*, 1995), to explain how individuals in deindividuated CMC settings relate to other individuals (Postmes *et al.*, 1998; Spears and Lea, 1994 cited in Carr *et al.*, 2011). It, also, tries to provide an explanation for the impacts of anonymity and identifiability on group behavior in such environment (Spears *et al.*, 2002a). It proposes that, interactions using computer facilities can increase group salience and conformity to group norms; due to lack of individual information related to identification of the group members (Reicher *et al.*, 1995). Anonymity is one of the factors that may lead members of a group to behave in a less inhibited way (Postmes and Spears, 1998), and is claimed to provide equal opportunity for participants to engage in free discussions, particularly, for those with lower status or lesser powers (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992). One of the vital assumptions, especially, within CMC context (Spears *et al.*, 2002b), the SIDE theory assumes is that members of a group in a situation where the self is identifiable to other group members, may avoid committing undesirable actions to powerful members to fend off penalties (Sassenberg and Postmes, 2002). SIDE, also, assumes that the anonymity of the group members and the lack of individuating cues enhance the shared group identity and unity, driving members towards group oriented behaviors (Lee, 2008). The lack of these visual cues could stimulate depersonalization, which consequently, stimulates conformity to group norms. It, also, assumes that communicating through the computer medium increases the willingness of low status participants to resist powers practiced by powerful group members (Spears *et al.*, 2002a). These depersonalizing effects of anonymity is relevant to how participants perceive both themselves and others, consequently, impacting the way participants behave (Spears *et al.*, 2002b). But, unfortunately, and despite that CMC technologies tries to obscure many important social cues; that may uncover participants’ power or status differences, these cues are able to pass through, giving indications about the owner or the authors of these cues.

To explain how anonymity impacts CMC the SIDE theory encompasses two aspects; Cognitive and Strategic (Christopherson, 2007). The Cognitive side of the theory focuses on how group and individual behavior within a group is mediated by anonymity. It focuses, as well, on individual identifications strength within the group (Lea *et al.*, 2001; Postmes *et al.*, 2001 cited in Christopherson, 2007). While the Strategic Component explores how members

of a group intent to exploit and use, strategically, the anonymity feature provided by the computerized meeting application (Spears and Lea, 1992 cited in Christopherson, 2007). This paper's emphasis is on investigating the Strategic Component of the SIDE theory, within GDSS anonymous meeting environment.

#### **4.2 The Strategic Component of the SIDE Theory**

SIDE's Strategic component has received scant scholarly attention, and needs further investigation (Christopherson, 2007; Spears *et al.*, 2002b; Flanagin *et al.*, 2002). It argues that, when individuals perceive how anonymity, within CMC, impacts interpersonal communication they start to exploit and utilize anonymity, strategically, using different strategies, to achieve their own objectives and needs (Spears and Lea, 1994 cited in Christopherson, 2007). For example, groups with low power status may utilize anonymity for resisting the powerful individuals. In this way group members are able to utilize anonymity to express their ideas and point of views, which could be contradictory to the ideas of other power group members. The Strategic Component of this theory, also, proposes that anonymity in CMC supports and fosters resistance. However, those opposing and contradictory ideas are unlikely to appear unless it is the group norm to express dissent ideas (Spears *et al.* 2002b).

Flanagin *et al.*, (2002) investigated how group members in CMC utilize anonymity to achieve their own goals. The study invoked the equalization hypothesis and the strategic component of the SIDE model, to explore the impact of individual's sex on group members' use of anonymity in CMC. The findings indicated that men and women employed strategies differently in terms of exploiting anonymity. Men were found keener to reduce anonymity to maintain power superiority over women. While on the other hand, women were found attempting to employ strategies to reduce power differentials by reducing social cues that may indicate their social status.

Also, the study of Coffey and Woolworth (2004) discussed how anonymity in online media forums impacts the level and tone of discourse, and how anonymity could be used, strategically, to express feelings related to sensitive issues. The researchers established two platforms to discuss a local crime; where suspected members of a local ethnic group killed a white man in a situation believed to be as a hate crime. The first platform was an anonymous online discussion board, where participants' identities were completely unidentifiable; to promote positive dialogue, exchange ideas and foster mutual understanding about the committed crime. The second platform was a local 'Face-to-Face' meeting, organized by the local authorities to discuss the same crime.

The research findings concluded that, the on line anonymous comments, where the participants believed that they were anonymous, were dominated with hatred, violence and racism. While on the other hand, the local citizens' 'Face-to-Face' meeting was almost free of racist or vengeance comments. The research findings were in agreement with the strategic side of the SIDE theory; the fact that the anonymous discussions on the online board reflected the group norm of hateful and racist attitudes. While, in an open discussion with identifiable identities the social norm was conservative. This indicates that anonymity was exploited to achieve a different goal than the original goal of the forum which was disseminating mutual and better understanding of the incident (Christopherson, 2007).

The field of GDSS is in need of a fresh theoretical perspective to explore and understand this technology, its design and its implementation process (DeSanctis *et al.*, 2008). The SIDE is assumed to enhance researchers' understanding of CMC by revealing how features of communication, such as anonymity, interacts with some attributes of group members, and impacts the way group members express their ideas and make their decisions (Lee, 2008). This paper investigates how meeting members in a GDSS context utilizes, strategically, the

anonymity feature provided by GDSS meeting applications such as the 'FacilitatePro' and the 'MeetingSphere' (Facilitate.com, 2013; MeetingSphere, 2013) to dissent other members, either colleagues or powerful members, generating effective task-conflict.

## 5 RESEARCH METHOD

Semi-structured interview method is the most commonly used kind of interviews in small scale social research (Thomas, 2011), and is one of the best data collecting tools used in Information Systems (IS) research (Myers and Newman, 2007). Semi-structured interviews with open questions were designed for this study for many reasons; firstly, for that it provides freedom of following up points, as necessary, which may encourage both the researcher and the interviewee to participate more actively by adding follow up questions, comments or gestures, uttering them in their own words (Packer, 2011; Thomas, 2011). Secondly, for that interviewee is allowed a greater deal of latitude in answering interview questions (Packer, 2011), and that it provides the interviewee with the opportunity to convey their experiences and perceptions (Kerwin *et al.*, 2011) of the issues raised within the interview. 'Semi-structured Interview' method combines the advantages of both structured and unstructured interview methods; allowing subjects to freely pass from one subject to another, without the interviewer losing control of the guide or the plan for the interview (Elbeltagi, 2002).

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with three categories of interviewees. The first category was the users of the GDSS application, either the 'FacilitatePro' or the 'MeetingSphere'. Those users were from different business and government sectors, and were who used these applications more than once in their real department meetings. The second category were experienced facilitators in maintaining and facilitating GDSS sessions in who have managed anonymous GDSS sessions, for at least two years, for different departments from business and government sectors. The third category was technical support experts who maintained technical support for these applications in the sites that provided GDSS meeting facilities.

Each interview discussed around thirty open-ended questions, and lasted for, approximately, one hour. Each interview covered issues relevant to the specific position or role of the interviewee. The users' questions investigated issues related to the usage of the software, and participants' interactions among themselves in an anonymous GDSS environment, and their interactions and perception of the anonymity feature itself. While the facilitators' questions investigated issues relevant to their experience in facilitating GDSS sessions, and to observing participants' behavior during these facilitated sessions. Finally, the technical support experts' questions were more related to the technical issues of the software itself, such as, the data encryption and data transfer protocols, and also to their experience in managing these GDSS sessions. A comprehensive image encompassing the most important three components of a GDSS meeting, the users, the facilitators and the technical support individuals, was constructed from interviewing those three categories.

## 6 FINDINGS

This paper has several implications for the anonymity in GDSS supported meeting and its impact in generating task-conflict. The first implication of this research is that it came consistent with the assumption of the Strategic Component of the SIDE theory; which indicated that groups with low power status may utilize anonymity for resisting other powerful members, and those group members are able to utilize anonymity to express contradictory ideas and point of views to the other powerful group members. Conducting meetings in a GDSS anonymous environment was found to increase dissent among meeting members due to the masked identities of the meeting members. Also, members in a GDSS

anonymous environment were found to be task-focused. Also, the anonymity feature of the GDSS software, which allows participants to contribute freely and simultaneously, plays a significant role in fostering task-conflict discussion within GDSS supported meetings. However, choosing the right participants, by departments' managers, to contribute to specific objectives of a meeting, also, plays an important role towards enhancing task-conflicts in GDSS supported meetings.

The second implication is that, although, the strategic component of the SIDE theory assumes that anonymous users of CMC exploit and use their hidden identities to achieve personal objectives, this assumption could not be found in a GDSS anonymous meeting context, and then could not be proven. The reason for this is the role the facilitator plays in preparing the meeting agenda, directing discussions towards achieving meeting objectives and preventing participants from diverging to unrelated or personal issues. Also, the electronic voting feature that the GDSS application provides, which some facilitators use effectively for each generated idea or required action plan, prevents personal conflicts, and makes it difficult for any personal objectives to be achieved. In addition to that, completely masked identities eliminate the possibility of establishing personal conflicts among meeting participants. The unidentifiable anonymity the iLab, where the GDSS meetings are held, provides for its participants, removes any personal grievances among meeting participants, and makes them focus on the subject under discussion. Nevertheless, some participants were found, in rare incidents, taking advantage of having masked identities to insult others and type in some jokes. However, these jokes were found, sometimes, related to the subject meeting subject, and as being of a value in creating cheerful atmosphere and easing the tension of a meeting.

## 7 CONCLUSION

One of the critical problems that decision-making groups contend against is the disposition of meeting group members to make decisions based on "normative pressure" instead of "factual information" (Miranda, 1994: 105). The GDSS application, as the communication medium among meeting members, is responsible for the strategic resistance within group members (Spears *et al.*, 2002a) to the powerful individuals of the group (Postmes and Spears, 2002). These applications allow all meeting members to generate ideas anonymously and participate freely without the fear of criticism (Jessup *et al.*, 1990). In this day and age people need to keep their jobs maybe more than any time before. Employees don't wish to jeopardize their careers, potentially, by saying things that might be controversial, especially, to superiors, even though they need to be said. Now more companies are realizing that this is an intimidating situation for employees to be in, and frustrating for their intellectual brain storming. The anonymity feature, provided by the GDSS meeting applications, is designed to encourage participants to speak their minds with superiors and colleagues. Anonymity, for some meetings, is essential; without the anonymous brain storming software, some participants won't speak their minds; particularly, when sensitive issues are discussed, or when high level managers are involved in the meetings. However, this issue is more salient in some cultures than others. Further investigation is required in this area, which may enhance the understanding of how this anonymity based GDSS applications impacts different environments, or how different cultures utilize GDSS anonymity in their meetings.

Overall, for the purpose of future research, this study encourages other researchers to investigate one of the GDSS meeting application's feature which is the 'Same Time / Different Places' configuration, which provides the ability to conduct a meeting among different participants from different locations at the same time. This feature allows participants to meet, using the network facilities, within different locations and without the need for meeting participants to physically move to one specific location or a meeting room. This facility could provide a solution to some of the concerns about the physical proximity of

meeting participants, such as typing observing and comment attribution phenomenon. Investigating the 'Same Time / Different Places' aspect could yield some new findings of this type of GDSS supported meetings.

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