VISUAL FRAMING OF ISLAM IN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED MUSLIM-MAJORITY NATIONS

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study comparatively explores Islam-related visual elements in selected online newspapers from Nigeria and Malaysia.

Methodology: A total of 425 photos and 23 videos published alongside Islam-related news collected from selected online newspapers between November 2015 and September 2016 were analyzed via content analysis.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that 43 out of the total number of photos reproduced violence while no violent videos were found in the select newspapers. It was also found that some of the photos used in the selected newspapers were either unrelated to the event being reported or used in different reports.

Applications: This study could be valuable for practicing journalists in the process of carrying out their jobs. It is also intended to influence the newspaper management decisions on how to disseminate information that is free of bias and maintain accountability for their news.

Novelty/Originality: This study provided evidence on the visual framing of Islam in online newspapers, particularly within Muslim-majority states.

Keywords: Framing, Islam, News Reporting, Extremism, Visuals.

INTRODUCTION

Controversies about Islam has recently dominated the media landscape. The prejudiced portion of media content, especially newspapers, has greatly contributed to the portrayal of Islam as a religion of extremism (Asmal, 2008; Kabir, 2010; Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013). This stereotypical portrayal is not a new phenomenon, because research has indicated that Islam has undergone particular trends of media portrayals since the news media invention (Thompson, 2013). After the incidence of 9/11, Islam continued to be presented more as a threat to western society than ever before. Ali, Khalid, and Lodhi (2009) contended that the western mainstream media, particularly newspapers, have been disseminating false information and reporting provocative issues against Islam, accompanied by misleading images. These images are commonly used by the media to create a negative image of Islam through misrepresentation and inaccurate interpretation.

A mixture of words and images are used in newspapers, especially following the advancement in information technology (Hassan &Azmi, 2018a), to cover stories. They disseminate visual messages that could be influential enough to persuade the audience. According to Barrett and Barrington (2005), the newspaper photo selection process is mostly biased, either intentional or unintentional. The use of photos to draw the reader's attention is presently prevalent in most newspapers. A situation whereby the photos are presented to evoke specific responses or prejudice the reader to view the news one way is referred to as 'visual biases'. This potential for bias from visual images must be examined (Barnett, 2003) to ensure credibility in news reporting.

Engelhard, Bartholow, Kerr, and Bushman (2011) documented that newspaper audiences are continuously bombarded with violent scenes in the media. Photos and videos are commonly used to cover violent acts, and photographs are taken out of context and edited to suit different purposes for which they were not initially intended (Eltantawy, 2007; Jacobsen, Jensen, Vitus &Weibel, 2012). It has typically been a strategy used by media outlets to use photos or videos in sensationalizing their news in order to catch the audience's attention. This is likely to occur whether the photos are intentionally or unintentionally meant to attack Islam. In fact, visual bias is capable of generating inordinate consequences. In addition, the analysis of visual elements in news reporting of Islam, particularly in the non-western media, is either lacking or abandoned (Ahmed &Matthes, 2017). Hence, this study aims to explore the visual framing of Islam in selected Muslim-majority nations.

VISUAL FRAMING OF ISLAM

There is much criticism in communication literature on how the media use visuals to frame news stories. For example, explicitly violent imageries are increasingly used, especially in reporting terrorism, accidents, executions, and disasters. At times, photos and videos accompanying news stories, particularly in online newspapers, are taken out of the original context and purpose for which the news is reported. They are commonly modified to outfit various but subjective purposes. Jacobsen et al. (2012) noted that stereotypes are graphically represented alongside news articles, especially by

displaying congregations, women with *hijab* or *burkas*, ghetto areas, or Muslims wearing Islamic attire with prominent beards. Violent visuals used in news stories typically focus on terrorism, which represent executions, mugshots, flogging, and stoning. The media mostly bombard their audience with violent scenes (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008; Engelhard et al., 2011).

According to the findings of Moore et al. (2008), newspapers usually use photos with numerous encoded negative connotations to describe terrorism scenes. At times, photos used out of context portray 'extremist figures' or 'terrorist suspects'. It was found that the most commonly portrayed scenes in reporting Islam include police departments and courts of law. In addition, much media coverage depicts photos of Muslims during crisis, demonstration or protest. Moore et al. stated that the prevalent use of Muslims' mugshots at the police departments and courts of law equals the high amount of terrorism-related news stories.

A study conducted byEltantawy (2007) demonstrated how the media portray violent photos of Muslims. The study showed that most of the photographs accompanying Islam-related news stories are either out of context or unconnected with the reported events. According to the author, this kind of photography is commonly used in western media today. As a result, the violent images of Muslims, as well as the Islamic attire worn by Muslim women, become much prevalent and famous. For example, the Afghani *burqa*, which is usually worn by Muslim women, became famous after several US news media reports accompanied by photographs throughout the 'war on Afghanistan' which started in 2001.

Another example is the popular photograph circulated in the US news media during Iraq's 2005 general elections, which depicts a Muslim woman wearing a black *hijab* with ink-stained fingers at the polling center. In addition, during Iran's presidential elections in 2005, the US news media paid much attention to photographs of Muslim women in black *Abayas* (full-length outer clothes are worn by Muslim women) reaching to the ground. Furthermore, during Egypt's elections in 2005, irrelevant images of Muslim women with various colored *hijabs* became prevalent in the western media. The aforesaid instances indicate the media's tradition of the visual portrayal of Muslims, especially in wrong contexts. The photographs used in the media are irrelevant to the news being reported. Muslims are depicted as the 'Other', and sometimes, absolutely diffident or mysterious.

The media create much confusion via the use of visuals to attract the audience with regard to terrorism-related issues. In some countries, such as France, where few Muslim women wear full-length *hijab*, photographs of the few women who wear *hijabs* are sensationalized to highlight the difference. Basically, how the media cover Islam-related topics could be influential in determining the people's understanding of Islam. The use of visuals in the media, either print or broadcast, could have a great influence on the audience's opinion about the events being reported. The religion of Islam is commonly caricatured and mocked, and this situation could result in a detrimental outcome which the journalists would have not precisely anticipated (Rupar, 2012). For example, the controversy of the Danish cartoon in 2005 became much consequential beyond the journalists' expectations.

According to Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005), as a faith community, Muslims neither belong to a single culture nor a race. Though not all Arabs are Muslims, the prevalent and commonly used Islam-related imageries are taken from the Arab countries. The images represent Arab Muslims with extended beards and guns as well as uninformed Muslim women in *burkas* and *hijabs*. This shows how the media overlooks the good range of Islamic traditions and their relevance to modern society. Eltantawy (2007)established that visuals provide more contexts in the news representation of Muslims when compared with the news stories which they accompany. In addition, photographs are likely to be more influential than the text stories which are exclusively provided for literate audiences.

Supplementary images form part of the tone and features of news articles (Hassan &Azmi, 2018b). Barrett and Barrington (2005) found that most studies focusing on the influence of news media – print or broadcast – on the audience's attitude paid attention to the text and verbal messages respectively. Nevertheless, beyond text or verbal messages, the media similarly provide the audience with visuals that could be much effective and persuasive. Wang's (2003)assertion also showed that bias is found more in visuals than in written or verbal messages. According to the findings of Moore et al. (2008), since photographs are commonly used alongside the news articles, visuals should be measured as variables in news content analysis.

Media bias does not help to promote the readers' knowledge and understanding; it highlights the problem rather than provides solutions (Allen, 2014). Very few findings from the previous studies (Vince, 2013) revealed positive coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media. A large majority of studies covered the western nations while Muslim nations and non-western media are mostly neglected. In addition, there is limited research on visuals and online media. The previous studies neglected the notion that negative visual depiction of Islam in the media could have serious implications, such as creating a phobia of Islam in the society (Ahmed &Matthes, 2017). The previous studies focused on issues such as cartoon publication, death of Osama bin Laden, terrorism, conflict, and migration (Asmal, 2008; Kabir, 2010; Yusof et al., 2013; Lindemann&Stolz, 2014). None of the previous studies focused on the visual framing of Islam in Muslim-majority nations.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This study is based on framing theory which assumes that the perceived meaning of news content is primarily inherent in the disseminated news messages. Framing theory is credited to Goffman (1974). The theory also postulates that journalists construct news frames by how they decide to highlight certain amounts of information and disregard others as well as how they construct news stories in such a way as to draw the attention of the audience toward certain issues. The news frame is seen as the style or outlook of the story. The news approach could be influential because the audience forms their views and opinion on a particular issue based on how the news story is constructed in the media (Potter, 2012; Freyenberger, 2013). As a communication theory, Framing theory explains the influence of news approaches on the audience's perceptions, views or opinions. These news approaches consist of the interpretative and the social or political contexts in which the story is reported as well as the topic and conceptualization of news in a specific context. For example, if the news media decide to construct a story using a negative tone rather than a positive one, the audience is likely to form a negative opinion on the topic being covered, because they are exposed only to the negative aspect of such a topic (Fourie, 2001).

This study considers a category of news framing called "Artifact", which is described by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) device through which the media frame an issue using intrinsic symbolic values including visual elements that hold more meaning than the text itself. These visual elements consist of images, photos, and videos (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Framing theory presumes that visuals hold more connotations than the subject itself. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) also described visuals as an important component of framing. Visual frames are much more than just verbal or textual story topics. Frames cannot be reduced or substituted for mere story topics because they do much more organizing and structuring work (Borah, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted based on evidence from a content analysis of visuals in online newspapers selected from Muslim-majority nations. *Punch and Vanguard* were chosen from Nigeria while *The Star* and *New Straits Times* were chosen from Malaysia. As a research procedure, content analysis allows communication researchers to logically explore how the media influence the audience's perception. Qualitative content analysis is extensively used in a number of current studies (Zhang &Wildemuth, 2009) asserted that one of the systematic ways of investigating issues of representation and prejudice in news coverage is to compare how different news media report the phenomenon under exploration. In addition, content analysis enables researchers to compare the possible bias of agenda-setters on a particular issue being reported (Cissel, 2012). Hence, this study comparatively explores the issue of visual framing of Islam in Nigerian and Malaysian English newspapers. The content analysis basically centres on the characteristics of media messages which form certain media content that could be used to logically evaluate particular phenomenon.

This study focuses on the aforesaid situation in Nigeria and Malaysia simply because both of these countries have similarities from the media and religious perspectives in numerous ways. The selected newspapers have undergone similar historical development during the British colonialism. Both Nigeria and Malaysia are categorized as Muslim-majority countries where Islam is practiced as a dominant religion (Ridgeon, 2013; Saidu, 2014). Since there is a lack of research on visuals and online media especially those related to Islam (Ahmed &Matthes, 2017), it would be interesting to explore the visual framing of Islam.

Visuals are typically part of the tone and features of newspaper articles (Hassan &Azmi, 2018b). Hence, via purposive sampling technique, data were gathered from Islam-related news articles in the chosen newspapers. The newspapers were selected based on their online readership. They are the top daily English publications in their respective countries (Abbott, 2011; Thomas 2014; "Top Newspapers in Malaysia", 2016; "Top Ten Nigerian Newspapers", 2017). Nigerian newspapers (Punch and Vanguard) have 3.00m and 2.43m site visitors while Malaysian newspapers (The Star and New Straits Times) have 3.34m and 1.99m site visitors respectively. Nigerian newspapers have a total of 5.43m site visitors while Malaysian newspapers have 5.33 visitors.

As a recognized non-probability technique, purposive sampling allows the researcher to decide on which elements should be included in the sample (Palys, 2008). This study used two different categories of sampling process; first, two online newspapers were selected from each country respectively, and second, Islam-related news articles were selected from the newspapers. Altogether, four daily newspapers with the highest online readership were chosen for analysis. From each of the selected countries, two newspapers were chosen for the purpose of comparison. *Punch and Vanguard*, as well as The Star and New Straits Times, were selected from Nigeria and Malaysia respectively. Subsequently, a sample of Islam-related news stories was gathered between November 2015 and September 2016.

The Islam-related news articles were gathered using an internet-based search. The research was conducted with the aim of locating relevant news articles from the accessible online archives of the respective newspapers. The words "Islam" and "Muslims" were used as keywords. Only news articles accompanied by visuals were incorporated in the content analysis. In addition, only news article focusing directly on issues related to "Islam" or "Muslims" meets the inclusion criteria. To further determine the relevance of articles in the original sample, each news story was thoroughly read and

scrutinized. Only news and feature stories were selected for the purpose of analysis. Hence, the content units of analysis consist of straight news and feature stories accessed from the chosen newspapers.

The visuals considered in this study consist of 'photos' and 'videos' accompanying Islam-related news in the chosen newspapers. Therefore, the coding characteristics comprised Islam-related photos and videos identified in the newspapers. The visuals used in framing Islam are classified as "violent photo/video" and "non-violent photo/video" respectively. The visuals were coded by means of the hierarchical coding scheme. One of the advantages of hierarchical coding is its ability to represent a huge amount of data in a comparatively little amount of digits (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Besides, Cohen's kappa was employed to measure the agreement level between code ratings of the chosen articles. Cohen's kappa is a statistical instrument used in measuring inter-coder agreement between two coders on certain categorical variables. The Islam-related visuals were numerically compared via cross-tabulation. Cross-tabulation is a method that allows researchers to compare the results of categorical variables especially in qualitative studies (Michael, 2001).

FINDINGS

The phenomenon of how photos and videos are used in Islam-related articles was investigated through the relationship between the visuals and the texts which they accompany. As stated earlier, only Islam-related articles accompanied by either photos or videos in the chosen newspapers between November 2015 and September 2016 were considered for analysis. A total of 425 photos and 23 videos within the aforesaid period fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Altogether, 448 visuals consisting of photos and videos were analyzed. Out of 448 visuals, 173 photos were found in Nigerian newspapers (Punch & Vanguard) while 252 photos and 23 videos were found in Malaysian newspapers (The Star & New Straits Times. This clearly shows that more articles with visuals are found in Malaysian newspapers than in Nigerian newspapers within the selected period of data collection. Videos were found only in Malaysian newspapers within the data collection period. The following table represents the photos and videos published in the chosen newspapers.

Table 1: The Use of visuals accompanying Islam-related articles

Visuals (videos & photos)	Nigeria (Punch & Vanguard)		Malaysia (The Star & NST)		Overall
	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Frequency
Using violent photos	10.1	19	9.52	24	43
Using non-violent photos	89.0	154	90.48	228	382
Using violent videos	0.0	0	13.04	3	3
Using non-violent videos	0.0	0	86.96	20	20

NST=New Straits Times

Table 1 show that Nigerian newspapers published more Islam-related articles (10.1%) with violent photos compared to Malaysian newspapers which published 8.7%. Hence, it could be acceptable that Malaysian newspapers published more articles (90.48%) with non-violent photos compared to Nigerian newspapers which published 89.0%. It can be seen that only Malaysian newspapers used articles with violent videos (13.04%) and non-violent videos (86.96%) respectively. Not a single violent or non-violent video was published in Nigerian newspapers within the chosen period. Out of 425 photos published in the newspapers, 43 reproduced violence while 382 were found to be non-violent. None of the 23 videos, which were published only in Malaysian newspapers, was found to reflect violence. It was found that, in some instances, the same photos were used to report different stories. The findings also revealed that while more violent photos were used in Nigerian newspapers, more non-violent photos were found in Malaysian newspapers. In addition, both violent and non-violent videos were used in Malaysian newspapers but not found in Nigerian newspapers at all.

It has become a common strategy for online media outlets to use violent photos or videos for shock appeal, just to attract more audience. Although the violent photos found in the chosen newspapers were minimal, they could be influential. In this regard, researchers argue that violent photos used in newspapers are highly consequential, as manifested by the tone of the articles which they accompany (Cunningham, 1992; Putnis, 1994, Fourie, 2004; Eltantawy, 2007; Moore et al., 2008). Continuous use of violent photos, either consciously or unconsciously, could be eerie to the audience's perception of the issue being reported. Intrinsically, the audience's mindsets, in the case of Islam-related events, would incline to believe in the negative depiction and amass negative views about Islam. This is because in reporting Islam, explicitly violent images of terrorism are used in the media. At times, photos are used out of context and modified to suit a different purpose other than which they were initially intended for. Continuous use of violent visuals could gradually persuade the audience, especially those who are uninformed about Islam, to believe that the visual content they view represents Islamic practices.

There have been conscious or unconscious distortions of facts committed by the newspapers in relation to the use of visuals in reporting Islam. For example, on June 13, 2016, *Punch* newspaper splashed a large photograph beneath a story headlined "DSS invites Osun religious leaders over hijab crisis". Surprisingly, a group of armed militia appeared in the photo. Another instance is where the same photo is repeatedly used in the newspapers to report several stories. For

instance, *Vanguard* newspaper published a story on July 26, 2016, headlined "Appeal court lifts ban on hijab in Lagos public schools" which was accompanied by a photo of infuriated hijabed women". The photo was a duplication of the one that has already been used in reporting a different event under the headline "Hijab crisis: Osun CAN order Christian students to attend classes in church robes" on June 10, 2016. It should be noted that this kind of media product is produced for the consumption of heterogeneous audiences.

In another scenario, it was learned that the newspapers at times use photos derogatory to Muslims. A critical look at an incident involving *The Star Newspaper* justifies this argument. The newspaper featured a headline intended to report terrorism, but the picture placed below the headline is of Muslims offering prayer. This combination resulted in an error of judgment on the newspaper's part. Misleading visual representation might influence the way readers perceive an issue. Hence, it is unfortunate to merge a photo of Muslims offering prayer with headline reprinting terrorism.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated how the media, particularly online newspapers, use visuals to draw the audience's attention, which become a tradition in most media outlets. This is referred to as "visual bias", which is a situation whereby the media present visuals in such a way as to evoke certain reactions or prejudice the audience to interpret the news story one way. According to Engelhard et al. (2011), readers are always perturbed with violent footage, especially in online media. In this study, 19.62% of the total number of photos used with Islam-related articles in the chosen newspapers reproduced violence. In certain instances, the same photos were used in the newspapers to report different events. A question must be asked as to why the same violent photos are repeated on numerous occasions. In addition, some photos were used out of context. This is consistent with the argument made by (Moore et al. (2008) that unrelated visuals with various connotations are frequently published in the media to exaggerate news stories. In this regard, the photo selection accuracy in the newspapers must be questioned. Barrett and Barrington (2005) noted that the photo selection process in most newspapers is – either intentionally or unintentionally – biased.

The newspapers were found to commit either intentional or unintentional distortions of facts with regard to the use of visuals in Islam-related stories. For instance, *Punch* newspaper placed a large photo below a news story on June 13, 2016 "DSS invites Osun religious leaders over hijab crisis". Astonishingly, a group of the equipped militia is shown in the photograph. In a different scenario, a story was published in *the Vanguard* newspaper on July 26, 2016, with the headline "Appeal court lifts ban on hijab in Lagos public schools" beneath which a photograph of exasperated "hijabed women" appeared. It was a duplicate of a previously used photograph beneath a different story headlined "Hijab crisis: Osun CAN order Christian students to attend classes in church robes" on June 10, 2016. These kinds of news stories could be highly influential, especially because they are produced for heterogeneous audiences across the globe.

As stated earlier, more violent photos were found in Nigerian newspapers compared to Malaysian newspapers. This is irrefutably logical because Nigeria suffers from ethnoreligious crisis and home terrorism. In this regard, a study found that Nigeria tends to be more susceptible to a crisis compared to Malaysia (Chibundu&Ishak, 2014). A number of studies (such as Eltantawy, 2007; Jacobsen et al., 2012) also revealed that photos and videos published alongside terrorism-related stories are usually used out of context, with a different rather than original connotations. Visuals are edited to meet different communication purposes. This is commonly used by media outlets as a strategy to attract the audience's attention.

Based the postulation of Framing theory, the audience being exposed to the violent photographs in the chosen newspapers are likely to form negative preconception about Islam, since visual representation could be more influential than the story itself (Fourie, 2001). As such, the general public, particularly those who are uninformed about Islam, might provocatively accept that Islam represents violence. This is likely to happen whether the purpose is deliberately or inadvertently to misrepresent Islam. As a result, the media deceitful messages are likely to generate individual negative frames in the audience's mindsets, amassing negative preconceptions of Islam. It must be noted that the use of violent visuals accompanying Islam-related news stories, though insignificant according to this study, could further reproduce violence (Eltantawy, 2007) particularly when used repeatedly or out of context.

Media censorship constitutes an important step in ensuring the quality of journalism ethics (Chen & Yang, 2018). In 2017, the Malaysian government warned *The Star* newspaper to be suspended unless its owners clarify a contentious front-page headline about a terrorist leader accompanied by a photograph of Muslims performing prayer. A "show cause" directive was given to the newspaper following the confusion it instigated everywhere especially on social media. The headline "Malaysian terrorist leader" was placed on the front page of the newspaper on May 27, 2017. It refers to Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian, as the regional leader of the Islamic State terrorist group, with a photograph of Muslims performing prayer below the headline. *The Star* mentioned that the photograph was published to fulfill its annual tradition of reporting the first *Magrib* (sunset) prayers in the month of Ramadan. Nevertheless, after the government's directive, some news editors were suspended immediately (Razak, 2017).

Subsequently, two more senior editors were indefinitely suspended, which shows that the newspaper management has confirmed its action of publishing either intentional or unintentional biased visuals against Islam. Some audiences opined that this incidence was ambiguous because of its religious aspect while others considered the government's

interference to be common in this regard. In 2011, *The Star* was warned for publishing a controversial advertisement in relation to the month of Ramadan (Razak, 2017). In Malaysia, *The Star* and *New Straits Times* have been severely censured for their treatment of terrorism-related topics. This kind of criticism is imperative, because according to Framing theory, how a news story about a particular subject is constructed determines the audience's perception of the subject. Journalists dictate how much prominence is given to a particular topic.

In sum, this study paid particular attention to the application of Framing theory to explore how visuals are used alongside Islam-related news, especially online newspapers, to generate certain prejudices in the audience's mindsets. It was found that violent visuals are more prevalent in Nigerian newspapers compared to Malaysian newspapers within the chosen period. Although the use of violent visuals was found to be minimal, its implication could be substantial. If this kind of portrayal continuous, bigotry and hatred of Muslims are much likely to be reproduced through biased media content. This is because the media tend to promote contentions rather than coexistence between religions. The findings also showed that Malaysian newspapers are more censured than Nigerian newspapers, particularly on Islam-related matters. It must be noted that Nigerian media outlets are generally managed by private entities and organizations while the Malaysian media industry is largely controlled by the government, with more effective censorship and regulation (Thomas, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Nigerian and Malaysian online newspapers use visuals in reporting Islam. This is imperative because creating awareness amongst the public on the role of media in reinforcing religious coexistence is highly crucial. Visual representation could be more powerful than the story text which is exclusively meant for a literate audience. The potential implications of using violent imageries are substantial, considering the basic assumption of Framing theory. Newspapers, especially due to the advances in media technology, become more influential and powerful than ever before. Today, the issue of online news has been called to contentions, particularly with regard to visual representation. It is unforeseen that, either consciously or unconsciously, this kind of representation occurs in Muslim-minority nations.

The findings showed that very few visuals reproduced violence, though their implications could be substantial. It was also found that no violent videos were found in the select newspapers. It was evident that some of the photos used in the selected newspapers were either unrelated to the event being reported or used in different reports. The violent photos were found to be used more in Nigerian newspapers than in Malaysian newspapers. This indicates the presence of effective news gate-keeping in Malaysian media because a rigorous editing process is likely to preclude manipulations. Visual representation has become much influential in news construction angles, which tends to create acrimony and antagonism. The ethics of journalism have been forfeited in favour of subjective interest. The power of visual bias must not be ignored since visual depiction is a significant angle of framing. To avoid visual bias, there is a need for the collective effort of reporters, editors, and media proprietors.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study is limited to the visual framing of Islam in four selected online newspapers in Nigeria and Malaysia. Further studies may consider other forms of media such as television, radio, or online news sources. In addition, the unit of analysis in this study –news and feature stories – might have been a limitation, and hence other newspaper contents such as editorials and opinion pieces could be analyzed in future research.

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