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Educational Messages in Cartoons and Caricatures by Malaysian Cartoonists

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ABSTRACT

Cartoonists utilise dialogue, metaphors, and visual elements to effectively convey a message that connects with the intended audience. This study aims to understand the messages and to investigate the visual elements presented by Malaysian cartoonists in their cartoon and caricature artworks. Cartoons and caricature artwork have been selected from four Malaysian cartoonists namely Datuk Lat, Kazim, Maro, and Keith. The qualitative method was carried out and content analysis was employed to obtain data from secondary data by implementing the Art Criticism approach and Semiotic theory. Based on the findings, two theme categories are found in the selected artworks: education and general. Sub-themes of the education themes category consist of messages about co-curricular education and education issues while sub-themes of the general themes category consist of messages about local culture, current issues, and lifestyle, portrayed by the cartoonists in their artworks. The findings also revealed that in general, all elements of art (such as line, shape, form, value, colour, texture, and space) and the principles of design (such as emphasis, contrast, balance, movement, and proximity) appeared in the artworks selected for the analysis. However, not all elements of art or principles of design are necessarily presented simultaneously in every cartoon or caricature artwork. Hopefully, this study can contribute to applying Art Criticism towards artworks, particularly cartoons, and caricatures.

Keywords: Cartoon, Caricature, Malaysian Cartoonists, Art Criticism, Visual Art Education

INTRODUCTION

The earliest known instances of visual storytelling date back to prehistoric times, when cave paintings and hieroglyphics were recorded. The art of painting depicts their experiences and events happening around them captured in visual forms. In this sense, early paintings served as a kind of “proto-writing”, a means of capturing and disseminating knowledge and messages (Bahn, P. (1998) as cited by Gray, M. P. (2010)). More information is kept in the occasional paintings and not only to discuss just the animal figures; these would all be regarded as proto-recording. There are additional meanings and messages the engraver wishes to express more than just hunting scenes. Cartoons are a more effective medium for communicating ideas than books because straightforward graphics and humour can effectively communicate complicated ideas and the message is quickly accepted (Zainuddin, N. & Mahamood, M, 2018). Latif, R. & Elgarrai, S. (2021) stated in their study that based on their findings cartoonists use words limited to slogans and short titles, metaphors and rely on the visual part of the cartoon to convey a message that is easily understood by the target audience.

Objectives of the Research

The research objectives were specified to fulfill the aim of this study, as listed below:

- a. To understand the messages presented by Malaysian cartoonists in their cartoon and caricature artworks
- b. To investigate the visual elements presented by Malaysian cartoonists in their cartoon and caricature artworks

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researcher conducted the study based on the following research questions, which are:

- a. What is the possible theme of the artwork?
- b. What messages do cartoonist convey through their cartoon and caricature artworks?
- c. What are the elements of art and principles of design presented by Malaysian cartoonist in their cartoon and caricature artworks?
- d. How does the cartoonist apply the elements of art and principles of design in their artwork?

METHODOLOGY

To help the researcher understand and study the existing knowledge, the related scope, and the issues involved in the related topics to achieve the objectives of this study, the theoretical framework studies conducted are based on Visual Culture theory, cartoon and caricature studies in Malaysia, Semiotic theory and Feldman's theory in Art Criticism.

Visual Culture Theory

Visuals on the screen can be interpreted as entertainment channels such as television, video games, film, or display on mobile devices such as mobile phones which have become a necessity gadget for everyone today. As believed by Jenks, C., (1995) the visual also known as the 'seen' phenomenon has been established by modern culture to hold the dual roles of exclusive entry into the symbolic treasury and essential source for communication. This realm of inner and cognitive visualization that stimulates memory, fantasy, and imagination is referred to as visual culture as said by Dikovitskaya, M. (2005). According to the researcher's reading, visual culture theory debates how images influence ways of learning, thinking, perception, and understanding and also might influence how people live their lives. Visual media such as images, videos, and animations a part of multimedia elements. Due to the advancement of technology that develops today, multimedia content can be added and edited to existing ordinary digital materials such as pictures, posters, and so on to be shared through websites, social media, or communication applications such as WhatsApp and Telegrams. Memes, stickers, and even edited short videos are examples of visual data that users may exchange on their social media that give visual satisfaction to the users and viewers as Jenks, C., (1995) mentioned the social theory of visibility is now immensely linked to looking, seeing, and knowing. Another example of daily life activities is the traffic signs and symbols. The colour components of traffic lights help drivers make decisions while driving and maintain smooth traffic to prevent unwanted accidents and this system may be interpreted as a form of visual communication.

Cartoon and Caricature Studies in Malaysia

Regarding Malaysia's growth in the visual arts, it is believed to have started in the year 1930s influenced by many social factors at that time since, before independence, cartoons by newspaper publications served as significant social weapons in the realm of cartoon art (Mahamood, M., 2017). The research done by Muliyadi Mahamood (1997) found that Malay newspapers have served as sources of news, information, and educational mediums since they first debuted in the year 1876 and he writes that four

primary periods have been identified in the evolution of Malaysian cartoon art (namely Pioneer era, New era, Glory era and Pluralist era), and the changes of each stage were influenced by society, culture, socio-political landscape, technology, and media ownership and coincided with shifts in cartoon style and principles (Mahamood, M., 2017). Cartoons, comic strips, and caricatures appear to be prevalent in contemporary visual culture, suggesting they may play a significant role in it. Cartoon art serves as a visual language capable of communicating messages and conveying social critiques (Mahamood, M., 2017). Fang et. al., (2021) mentioned that caricature uses its artistic abilities to create its own language or distinctive code and is commonly used in a variety of fields, including newspapers, magazines, commercial advertising, animated films, and others, to comply with the aesthetic standards of public entertainment.

Semiotic Theory

According to available literature, the researcher would define semiotic terms as studies of signs, objects, and meanings. The relationship between semiotics and visual art is already acknowledged as the visual form resembles most of the signs' attributes. Culler, J. D. (1986) indicated that the term semiotics originated from the Greek *semeion* which refers to 'sign'. while (Yakin & Totu, 2014) stated that Greek *semainon* brings the meaning of signifier and *semainomenon* defined as signified or indication. As stated by Dweich, et. al. (2022), Atkin (2006) asserts that despite the numerous sign theories that have been proposed throughout history, Peirce's idea remains unique and groundbreaking as Peirce highlighted the significance of signs or indicators insists that without using them, declaring that he was unable to pursue any of the following scientific fields: mathematics, metaphysics, astronomy, and many others. Pierce explained semiotics as a sign, which refers to a form, pairing with the meaning, of what the sign refers to. To put the explanation into the examples of analogy, let us think of smoke and fire, where the occurrence of smoke indicates that there is a fire. The semiotic concept introduced by Charles Sanders Pierce is more to the process of logical thinking with the placement of actual meaning to something. Because Pierce is a philosopher who studied logical thinking, he is keen on the way human beings think through the sign that brings the rationality of thought (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993 as cited by Yakin & Totu, 2014).

Feldman's theory in Art Criticism

Feldman's four-step approach to evaluating an artwork namely; descriptive, formal analysis, interpretation, and judgment (Alashari, D., 2021). However, Yahya, et. al. (2023) mentioned art criticism as art appreciation and added knowing, perceiving, comprehending, and appreciating as part of it. Although the names and terms employed vary, they each contribute towards the same objective. Art criticism is the systematic analysis and evaluation (Yahya, et. al. 2023) and critical analysis of art implies a methodical assessment of creative works from the critic's point of view. The approach developed by Edmund Burke Feldman in art criticism is highly regarded for its structured framework, making it particularly effective for analyzing visual artworks, especially in educational settings. The researcher finds this theory applicable because it is systematic and meets the criteria for understanding the meaning and ideas that cartoonists aim to convey through their visual works. It also facilitates the evaluation of cartoons and caricatures based on both their formalistic and conceptual aspects. Based on the details the researcher gets from the theoretical framework, for this study, a customised structure has been designed by the researcher to serve as a guideline to conduct the research further. The framework illustrates several elements and how they could influence the development of a productive art criticism process.

A conceptual framework for this study is shown below:

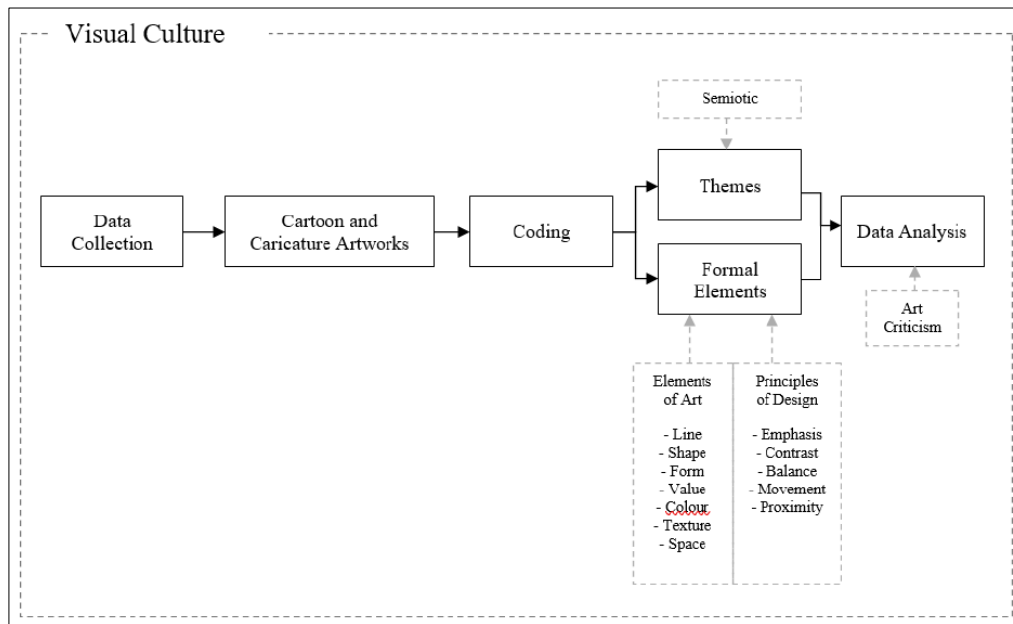


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The target of this study is to collect visual data from cartoon and caricature artworks by Malaysian cartoonists and analyse the data to get the answers to the research questions. In this study, the qualitative method was carried out and content analysis was employed to obtain data from secondary data. A formalistic analysis was applied to the contents selected to search for the visual qualities of the artwork. In contrast, semiotic theory with contextual analysis was carried out to look at the contents and then code and define the possible themes and meanings that occurred in the selected cartoon and caricature artworks. The summary of the research design for this study is shown below:

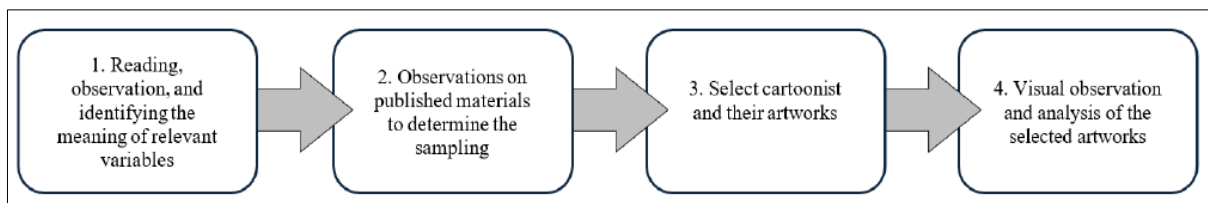


Figure 2: Research Design

Population And Sampling

The population in this study consists of Malaysian cartoonists, a sample of whom use their artwork to discuss aspects of education or topics connected to the educational system and promote information or to educate, from a Malaysian perspective respectively. To use as research materials, cartoons and caricatures artwork have been selected from four Malaysian cartoonists namely Datuk Mohammad Nor bin Khalid (Datuk Lat), Khazim bin Hj Sulaiman (Kazim), Norkamaro bin Mohd Nor (Maro), and Keith Chong Kah Hwee (Keith).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

By conducting this study, the researcher observed that Malaysian cartoonists produced various themes of cartoons and caricatures. This study aims to highlight the significance of emphasizing educational messages and themes in cartoons and caricatures, focusing on aspects specific to Malaysian culture and identity; based on the education system themes and general themes. From a broad perspective, each cartoon and caricature artwork serves as a method of educating individuals, as a channel for transmitting information and knowledge to readers, or as a means of criticism of specific events and targeted audiences. The selected artworks were analysed by applying the four steps of Art Criticism and semiotic theory.

After reviewing and analysing the selected population and samples, the researcher summarised the key ideas presented by the cartoonists in their cartoon and caricature artworks and compiled them, as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Themes categories

Categories	
Education	General
Co-curricular education	Local culture
Issues of education	Current issues
	Lifestyles

For educational themes, the artwork depicts co-curricular activities and issues within them. For general themes artwork, cartoons, and caricatures with the qualities of local culture, current issues, and lifestyle are selected to be analysed and discussed further.

Themes and Messages presented by Malaysian Cartoonists in their Cartoon and Caricature Artworks with Analysis of Visual Elements

Every artwork reflects the cartoonist's identity through the subjects, styles, and strokes used in the illustration. After classifying some of the themes under one category, the researcher narrowed it down to just five, which were covered in the analysis parts. Based on the purpose of this study, the themes that occurred and were put into the discussion are related to co-curricular education, issues of education, local culture, current issues, and lifestyle, as seen from the Malaysian perspective.

Co-Curricular Education Theme

In this study, co-curricular activities are defined as activities undertaken by students outside the regular school curriculum. The Malaysian Ministry of Education outlined several policies as a guide and direction for education in Malaysia. This is an attempt to fulfill National Education policy whereby to create moral, ethical, balanced, and harmonious individuals who may attain personal well-being and contribute to the harmony and success of the nation and society (MOE, 2024). Student activities at school extend beyond what happens in the classroom, lab, or library. It is encouraged for students to engage in co-curricular activities as a means of enhancing their own competencies and soft skills.



Figure 3: Co-curricular Education Theme by Kazim

Figure 3 shows a cartoon by Kazim related to Scout's camping activities on school grounds. According to this one-panel cartoon, this appears to be a Scout's camping activity based on their uniforms. Two main characters are having a conversation and there is also a cat as an additional character. The student explained to his teacher why the other students could not join them in doing activities and the teacher can be seen standing with folded hands and his eyes were half open to show he was questioning the decision to do activities during the school holidays. Kazim illustrated the teacher with half-opened eyes to show he feels frustrated as fewer students show up while the rest have to spend time with their families during the school holidays and cannot join the camping activity at school. The researcher thinks that this artwork is relatable and presented well to highlight a message about one of the popular co-curricular activities in Malaysia's schools, which is outdoor and camping activities. Further analyses of other co-curricular education theme artworks by Keith similarly appeared to be about activities outside and away from the school area, and also in another artwork by Keith, a group of female students are being taught about first aid techniques for head injuries.

Issues Of Education Theme

In general, analyses of all artworks related to the theme show the cartoonists elaborate on the message such as the issue of heavy bags among primary school students, integrity, and mental health among teachers. Then, to support the findings, tertiary data was captured through future reading from various sources such as online journals, online newspapers, and other cited Internet sources. As shown in Figure 4, the researcher found the artwork by Kazim showed a young boy in a loose school uniform standing in front of the door carrying what appeared to be a big, hefty bag. The cartoonist implements the principle of contrast in illustrating his artwork by creating a visual difference between the boy's appearance - before and after. The element of art - the use of line - is shown by a double wavy line at the young boy's legs and bag to create an illusion of his shaking legs and body. He had one hand gripping the waist of his trousers to keep them from falling. According to the researcher's analysis, the boy had experienced changes in his body size and weight due to carrying a large and heavy school bag to school after five months and the researcher thinks this artwork has a strong impact and effectively illustrates the cartoonist's message and social critique on the issue of heavy bags among primary school students.



Figure 4: 'Kes beg berat' by Kazim

The message about the issue of heavy bags among primary school students, as depicted by cartoonists in their artwork, is not new. The study's findings regarding the issue of heavy bags among primary school students align with analyses made in the selected artwork, as well as numerous articles and news reports posted on the internet over the years, which discuss related topics. New Straits Times (2022) published an article titled 'Lockers among initiatives to banish heavy school bags' that mentioned students may keep their textbooks in the desk drawers, for single-session schools. Supported by the article published by BH Online (2023) regarding the Ministry of Education praising the initiative of the school, Sekolah Kebangsaan (SK) Seri Permai, Bayan Lepas that produced the innovation of modifying the study tables supplied by the Ministry to solve the issue of heavy bags faced by students then qualify the school to receive recognition. As a result of the researcher's reading on the internet, the news, and her personal experience, the researcher agrees that this issue needs to be reviewed comprehensively and resolved by the authorities.

Local Culture Theme



Figure 5: Local Culture Theme by Lat

Malaysia is a country with ethnic diversity among its people whereby there are descendants of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others. As seen in Figure 5 above, Datuk Lat illustrates the scenery in the food court attended by various visitors who can be identified through their appearance and certain special characteristics. There is a woman with high buns, children sitting on a chair, a man of Sikh descent, office workers wearing neckties, and a motorcyclist holding a helmet in his hand. Two stalls are closed because they are on holiday to celebrate their festivals which are Hari Raya Aidil Fitri and Chinese New Year. Only one stall owned by an owner of Indian descent remains open, drawing crowds of visitors to come to eat. The researcher appreciates the message conveyed by this artwork, which vividly illustrates the multicultural atmosphere of Malaysia that accommodates cultural diversity and shows vibrant food culture. With a similar theme, an artwork by Maro conveys a social reaction and parody of the recent news that happened around that time frame where the cartoonist tried to illustrate a public figure named Dato' Vida with the Kelantan football team (TRW). The use of pink colour, a perfect metaphor for the news of Kelantan's stadium was painted pink colour as a condition and exchange for accepting the sponsorship offer and the rumours of jersey colour for the players. The 'V' sign is believed semiotically to refer to her name Dato' Sri Vida and her Vida Beauty brands. The researcher thinks that the cartoonist applied the elements of art, the principle of design, and the semiotic elements of sign, symbol, and objects clearly in these outstanding cartoon and caricature artworks as the message and ideas of both cartoonists are presented well. Even though Malaysia is a multicultural country, our differences in language and perspective are completely irrelevant when it comes to public holidays, sports, and food.

Current Issues Theme

Cartoons and caricatures also play a role as a medium to discuss things such as current issues. Through the researcher's observation of the artworks by the selected Malaysian cartoonists, there are many artworks published to convey messages and situations related to current issues that happened at a particular time including weather and environment, general health, and also political issues. For example, an artwork by Keith, portrays an idea and message during the COVID-19 pandemic that happened worldwide a few years back. Also, an impactful caricature by Maro (Figure 6) published in December 2022 is illustrated to highlight the event that happened in Malaysia where Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was named and served as Malaysia's tenth prime minister after winning the 15th Malaysia General Election (GE2022) in November 2022.



Figure 6: Current Issues Theme by Maro

Lifestyle Theme

As seen in Figure 7, Datuk Lat's artworks convey the comparison in time of how the ploughing method has been done in the paddy field. Apart from the messages about how technological change, based on

this artwork the reader can learn about agricultural activity in traditional methods where cows and buffaloes, were used to till the ground and plough paddy fields which now are replaced by rice ploughing machines.

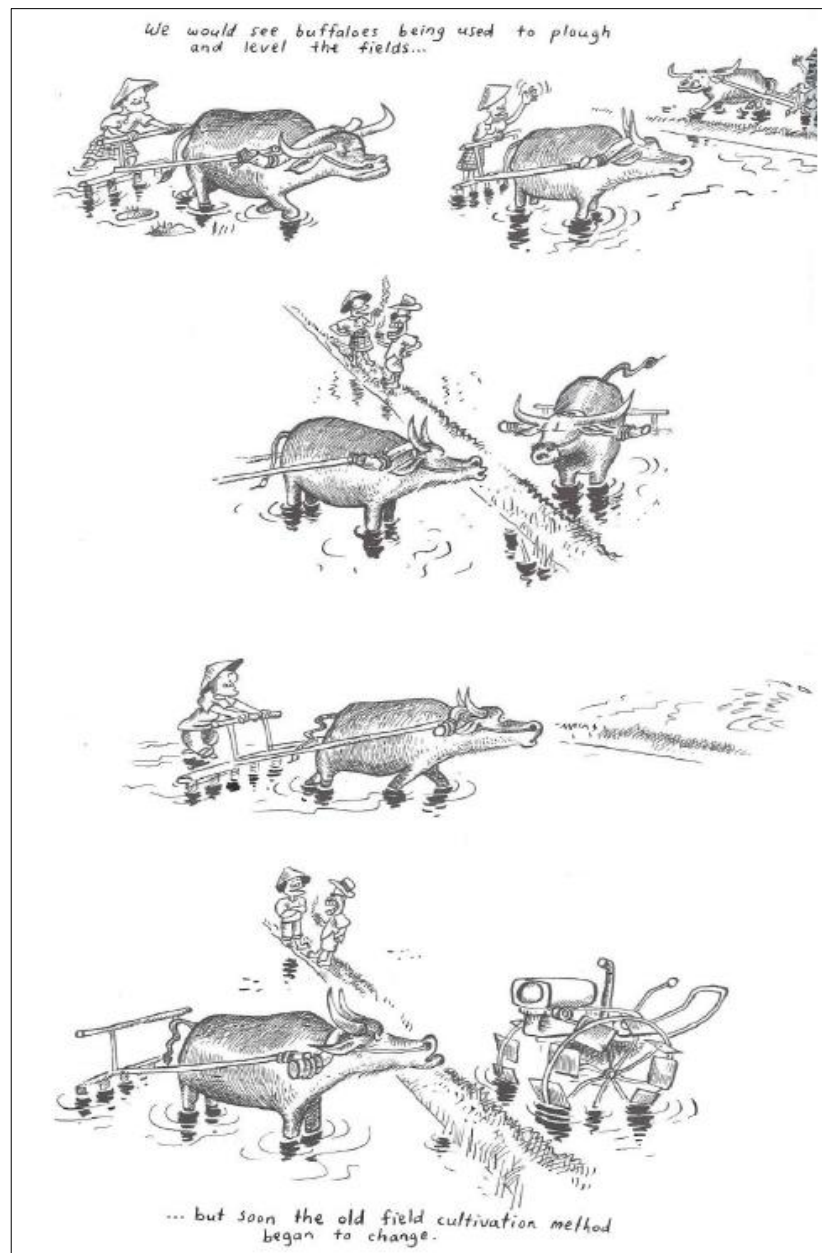


Figure 7: Lifestyles Theme by Datuk Lat

While cartoonist Maro in his artwork, compares and differentiates the viewers' responses after watching the respective films to show how the film would affect the viewers. In another artwork, cartoonist Maro attempted to highlight the trend that is happening nowadays in the Malaysian scene that things are radically different now, with an easier path to popularity with the help of social media such as TikTok and YouTube and viral potential (or known as 'influencer'), anyone can become famous just in an instant, at a much lesser cost. The findings also revealed that in general, all elements of art (such as line, shape, form, value, colour, texture, and space) and the principles of design (such as emphasis, contrast, balance, movement, and proximity) appeared in the artworks selected for the analysis. However, not all elements of art or principles of design are necessarily presented simultaneously in every cartoon or caricature artwork.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that various themes, messages, and visual elements can be found in cartoons and caricatures produced by Malaysian cartoonists. In addition to serving as a means of communication between the cartoonist and the readers, cartoon, and caricature artworks can also be used to apply the Art Criticism and Semiotic theories for Visual Art Education. For Malaysian cartoonists, the artwork produced is based on the local style in terms of the messages to be conveyed, subject matters, language styles, and other specific features and issues. It turns out that cartoons and caricatures serve as mediums to promote local culture to a wider scope of external readers. Overall, cartoons and caricatures in general, show qualities as effective educational tools that entertain, inform, and trigger thought. Undeniably, there are positive and negative messages in any of the artwork produced depending on the perspective of the cartoonist and the reader himself. Consequently, this study can also support the literature on Malaysian cartoons and caricatures with general themes, culture, and current issues, especially those produced by cartoonists in Malaysia. In addition, the findings of this study reinforce that cartoons and caricatures serve purposes beyond humour and entertainment. They can also act as a medium for education, communication, and information in a simple and relaxed manner. It is hoped that this study can contribute to the application of Art Criticism towards artworks, particularly for cartoons and caricatures.

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