

The Enthymeme: An Analysis of Sexist Advice Animals

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Advice animal memes are popular online jokes that utilize images juxtaposed with humorous text. This essay shows how the enthymemes of advice animal memes are detrimental to audiences because they require one to acquire a sexist mentality to understand the jokes. Over time, this mindset is reified, making users believe the material. This essay involves an analysis of sexist advice animal memes, Overly Attached Girlfriend and Good Girl Gina, and the rhetorical situation to prove how people are concretizing the memes' sexist concepts. A possible solution for harmful memes, counter-meming, is also explored.

The latest comedy club is located on a computer, tablet, or smart phone where millions of jokes are posted and reposted. The comedy club mentality of the Internet allows readers to be more accepting of sexist humor because it is believed to be innocent (Gray and Ford 288). Here, sexist humor has greater approval because the material is not under logical or moral review. The cues associated with humorous messages online signal to audiences that the joke should not be subjected to "the usual conversational rule of literality, logical thinking and critical scrutiny" (278). Therefore, users respond accordingly by not acknowledging the idea that what they are reading is sexist and can have ramifications (278).

People learn how to read and behave given the situation. In a comedy club, people may base what they find funny on the comedian's actions or the fact that everyone else is laughing. However, on the Internet, one cannot base the humor off of the comedian. Authors are often anonymous and cannot judge the content based on the reactions of those around them—it is only the user and their device. In this new environment, the content should be analyzed. What if negative perspectives are being intensely portrayed? Readers lose all speculation behind the meaning of jokes because they are supposed to be only "just a joke." Some audiences believe it is preposterous to take them seriously, and they avoid critical thinking.

One favored joke formed online is image macro memes: images superimposed with text for comedic purposes. A popular kind is advice animals, used to give various forms of advice to readers. They follow a general format where a two-line joke is positioned on top of a reusable character. Originally, these memes used animals as their characters, hence the name "advice animals," but human characters have begun to be incorporated to make commentary on human behavior. The images chosen for advice animal memes are crucial to their comprehension because the images must communicate an immediately comprehensible archetype. In order to be effective, the text and image must identify and follow a specific archetype; if a meme does this well, it may be successful.

Memes' ability to be funny, concise, readable, and understood by readers could contribute to their popularity. Due to their popularity, it is likely for one to encounter memes online, therefore, it is necessary to analyze the content of memes to determine if the material could be dangerous to viewers. Memes have transformed over time to become forms of social commentary that commonly operate on gender roles and reinforce patriarchal ideals. Through an analysis of advice animal memes, I will illustrate that advice animals can be dangerous because they utilize the

enthymeme, an informal syllogism, as a means for audiences to understand the humor; however, most people do not realize that by using the enthymeme to understand the material, which can be sexist, they are reifying the beliefs of whatever the meme is portraying. They can only comprehend the joke if their rational thought follows the joke. My examination will show the unique challenges they create for Internet users, in the hopes that critical discussion will arise surrounding sexist and discriminatory memes.

History

The first advice animal style meme created was Advice Dog, who gives poor advice that would harm the viewer if they followed it, displayed in figure 1 (“Advice Dog”). The juxtaposition of a puppy and maliciousness contributed to the success of Advice Dog, which quickly became correlated with humorously imparting bad advice.



Fig. 1. “Advice Dog”

If an explanation for Advice Dog was not given, another meme could have been included that says “Eat Mushrooms / They made Mario grow,” and the reader could understand that the meme is about giving poor advice because mushrooms can be poisonous or hallucinogenic (“Advice Dog”). With each Advice Dog read, the reader will learn to associate the puppy with malevolent advice. While most people would consider this an advantage, it has the potential to harm readers as a result of the lack of critical thinking about memes; therefore, readers will not challenge memes with negative content, like sexism, and readers will slowly assimilate the information.

Interpretive Challenges of Memes

Audience perception is central for written jokes because the audience has to “evaluate an often anonymous or abstract rhetor [which may] lead to more diverse reactions than the other forms” (Weaver 545). It is rare to know who wrote a meme due to the ease of reposting, making it difficult to determine the author’s ethos. With no author to center the ethos, the audience may misinterpret the meme. By having an unclear purpose, memes can be construed as insulting or entertaining.

In fact, memes are different than jokes in a comedy club because a new kind of ethos is established. In a comedy club performance, comedians establish ethos through their actions, dressing a certain way or using various tones and facial expressions to indicate how to understand them. Throughout their act, comedians also risk their ethos by the content of their jokes. They render themselves vulnerable in hopes that they do not offend the audience, which is not the case for memes. When reading a meme, it is unclear what the original author intended. As Stephanie Vie noted about the Human Rights Campaign Facebook logo, “While many may have posted it to show support for gay marriage equality, others may have placed it in their profile to follow the crowd.”

This duality proves that one cannot know for sure what a poster intended. If someone finds a meme offensive and makes a comment, the poster can respond and say that he or she understood it differently, risking little to none of his or her ethos. And if the poster is anonymous, there is even less ethos risked because he or she most likely will not experience being upbraided in “real life.” As a result of this newer ethos, users may feel immune to offline consequences.

But memes are more perilous than other forms of jokes because they rely on the enthymeme. Enthymemes, like regular jokes, cause audiences to form opinions about written jokes for themselves. They force the audience to determine the unstated assumption and therefore understand the joke. Enthymemes, according to Aristotle, persuade viewers more efficiently because it is believed an enthymeme validates their thoughts. For example, an Aristotelian enthymeme is “Socrates is mortal because he’s human” (Weber and Brizee). Speakers and listeners discern this from “Socrates is mortal / Therefore, Socrates is human.” Since he is human, and humans are mortal, both parties agree that the premise leads to the logical conclusion that Socrates is mortal. In terms of advice animal memes, the text is the expressed premise with which the audience agrees, and the audience uses the implied premise, which is the image accompanying the text, to understand the context. Aristotle claims people are more willing to accept the logic of an enthymeme when it follows their own rational thought. With advice animals, rational thought has to typically follow irrationality due to the ludicrousness of the content, and as a result, audiences feel less inclined to think analytically about the meme and its message.

Even though most advice animal images are chosen for their ridiculousness, the image is the fundamental premise that aids the audience’s comprehension of the meme. For instance, in figure 2, the text states, “Come on Facebook... Just forty more ‘likes’ and I can save that little girl’s life” (“Come on Facebook”). Once the image of the doctor is included with the text, the audience is able to follow the fundamental premise—the trivial actions of Facebook have minimal significance to the outside world—that this meme is making fun of spam pictures and articles circulating on Facebook, asking for “likes,” because the idea that they will save a girl’s life is clearly preposterous.



Fig. 2. “Come on Facebook...”

Originally, memes were meant to be simple, inoffensive jokes, but now, memes transcend their initial purpose to provide input on specific social issues. Audience members look at memes as lighthearted fun, enjoying the absurdist content and believing they are not seriously influential, or they read the meme “straight,” believing that it actually provides social commentary. However, this provides a challenge for determining whether or not memes are truthful because it is completely based on the rhetor and readers. Due to anonymity, one can have trouble distinguishing if the author is being absurd or serious or how the readers interpret it, possibly resulting in toxic outcomes.

With the popularity of memes rising, one cannot help but think of the consequences of this

newer form of communication. Audiences can absorb the memes and the enthymemes they portray, especially when using images of humans. Most archetypes in advice animal memes that use humans involve gender roles. Due to the continuous acclaim of sexist memes, the audience concretizes the sexism because the viewer is engaging in reading and sharing memes that incorporate negative themes in order to praise a patriarchal society. This effect often goes unnoticed by readers because of their insouciant attitude respective to humor, hindering audiences from critically thinking about the message (Gray and Ford 278).

Overly Attached Girlfriend

Overly Attached Girlfriend is a webcam picture of a brunette girl wearing an aqua T-shirt, her dark eyes, widened, stare into your soul. She is a joke about what clingy, overprotective, or obsessive girlfriends may say to their significant others (“Overly Attached Girlfriend”). A notable example of a typical Overly Attached Girlfriend meme reads, “I was looking through your texts earlier / Who’s Mom?” (“Overly Attached Girlfriend”). The expressed premise of this meme is an extremely jealous girlfriend who even spies on her partner’s text messages to see if he is cheating on her. With the image of Overly Attached Girlfriend, the reader grasps the implied postulation, which is that she is obsessed with her partner and gets jealous even if her partner is only talking to his mom.



Fig. 3 “Overly Attached Girlfriend”

This meme focuses on snooping and jealousy. Intruding on one’s privacy and enviousness are aggressive behaviors, which deviate from gendered concepts of femininity (Bemiller and Schneider 469). The central message is that women cannot exude anything that diverges from established feminine traits; if a woman acts masculine, her behavior is ignominious. The values and norms of a culture determine whether a meme will be successful because they express opinions on social issues (Shifman and Thelwall 2567). On the Internet, the established norm for women appears to be a nurturing, compassionate, and patient role, so whenever women are taken out of that feminine role, they are subject to ridicule.

Women are also mocked for being the binary opposite of men (as portrayed in Internet memes). Men are established as wanting freedom while women want commitment (Shifman and Thelwall 2573). Overly Attached Girlfriend manifests the stereotype that women crave commitment and that this craving should be viewed negatively. Michael Kimmel argues that women’s social statuses are dictated by their relationships with men. Subsequently, women know that in the pursuit of a successful position in the social hierarchy, they must submit to men’s conception of the perfect woman (245). Accordingly, women, heeding the advice of Overly Attached Girlfriend, will be urged to act femininely and repress aspects of their personality.

Male readers view Overly Attached Girlfriend as a symbol for women taking away their free-

dom. Kimmel asserts that men avoid commitment in order to establish a collective view that casual sex is more desirable than long-term relationships (259). Memes like Overly Attached Girlfriend reaffirm the concept that commitment is useless and can be harmful for men. Memes are unknowingly affecting the way in which we think about one another. Women may become wary about what they say and how they act around their partners in order to avoid being seen as an Overly Attached Girlfriend, and men may proceed to view women as a black hole for independence, which prohibits them from doing anything entertaining. Whenever women are viewed positively or negatively, successful memes appear to be judged based on women's fulfillment of traditional gender roles.

Good Girl Gina

Through memes, gender stereotypes display the quintessential woman according to the masculine perspective, and audiences who read memes may regard memes as an accurate tool for how they should behave. The meme used to exemplify good female behavior is Good Girl Gina, a glamour shot of a brunette woman smiling. The first Good Girl Gina was created by a boyfriend describing his girlfriend: "Uses your bathroom / Puts the seat up when she's done" ("Good Girl Gina"). Shortly, she developed into the manifestation of man's vision of the perfect woman. By depicting what "good" is, the meme ultimately controls women by enforcing the idea that women should behave like Good Girl Gina.

According to the book *Guyland*, women have the choice to be either a babe or a bitch: "The criteria [for a babe] goes something like this: She should be physically fit but not muscular, sexy but not slutty, pretty but naturally, not dumb but not too smart... adoring but not needy" (Kimmel 249). Most Good Girl Ginas follow these standards, communicating the same beliefs to women who, in turn, believe they must behave this way to win men's approval. Conversely, Good Girl Gina, and the criteria it uses to depict the perfect woman, controls men by altering their thinking to believe that if they are going to commit to someone, she should act like Good Girl Gina.

The prevailing Good Girl Gina meme often accentuates that a woman's position is to sexually relieve a man. Another ideal men have generated for Good Girl Gina is that she cannot fall into stereotypes, like wanting commitment ("Good Girl Gina"). However, men are willing to overlook her involvement in stereotypical behavior as long as it fulfills their desires. One meme that exemplifies both standards reads, "Brings pound of bacon to third date / 'I thought I'd cook this for you tomorrow morning,'" shown in figure 4 (6hMinutes). This meme utilizes the concept that the first time a couple has sex is after the third date. The expressed premise is that a woman is assuming that since she and whomever she is dating are on their third date, they will be having sex that evening. The other denoted assertion is that the woman will cook for her date in the morning. The implication: good girls put out after the third date and will cook for the date afterwards, satisfying him on multiple levels. Tending to his needs gives her satisfaction.



Fig. 4. 6hMinutes

Bemiller and Schneider assert that jokes involving women taking care of their partners exhibit social deprecation and reinforce women's subordination. The enthymeme of Good Girl Gina is that a woman is only good if she fulfills a man's physiological needs, and she should be happy while she does it. Bemiller and Schneider refer to women's stay-at-home role as a lesser role that showcases the concept that women should not be independent or see themselves as independent of men (470). Women begin to accept their submissive role because "Girls are learning...to know themselves from the perspective of men, thereby losing touch with their own bodily feelings as desires" (Tolman 302). By placing men on a pedestal, they succumb to their desires in order to achieve their final goal: commitment. Kimmel contends, "Women believe that if they love him well enough, hard enough, and are as accommodating as possible, he'll change," so in order to get men to change their beliefs on commitment to be more positive, women begin accommodating men through their physical needs (261).

It is clear that something must change on the Internet in order to open audience's minds to the sexism they are exposed to through memes. From the continuous exposure of these memes, audiences can begin to have their rational thoughts parallel the beliefs projected by the memes, which can lead to distorted perceptions of others and changes in one's own behavior.

Sexist Humor and Beliefs

Most dismiss memes as a joke and do not recognize the possibility that they can influence human behavior according to the "advice" given, overlooking their sexism. What critics have not suggested is that advice animal memes influence readers by requiring a discriminatory mindset to understand the humor in memes. Audiences are persuaded by the implied values and beliefs of memes' messages as a consequence of memes making the sexist notions they project appear acceptable (Bemiller and Schneider 462). People's sexist beliefs are being reinforced while those who are not sexist are encouraged to begin thinking that way.

Online, people are attracted to content that aligns with their beliefs because of filter bubbles, algorithms that "personally tailor your query results," meaning that the Internet decides what you would like to see and shows you that content while editing out others (Pariser). Pariser argues, "The challenge with these kinds of algorithmic filters...is that, because they're mainly looking at what you click on first, it can throw off that balance. By editing what users see online, once individuals click on, like, or share a certain number of memes, it is probable that they will be exposed to more. In the case of sexist advice animal memes, if one were to get them into his or her filter bubble, that person would be more susceptible to the subject matter, which could ultimately influence them to have more sexist beliefs.

Critics disagree about the influence of Internet humor on social attitudes. For example, Shifman and Lemish argue that women are always in jokes that build onto previously set stereotypes: women are not "neutral joke protagonists" (2). Women are not viewed as neutral in jokes due to the power of their previous stereotypes; these previous stereotypes have concretized stereotypical thinking in humorous situations, making people immediately jump to sexist conclusions when women are in jokes. The endless creation of memes tarnishing women is contributing to the issue. Once the key figure in a meme is shown to be a woman, the audience expects a meme to go a certain way. Females are portrayed as either sexually complying to men's wishes or preventing men from independence, causing audiences' expectations of the jokes to involve humor concerning women's relationships with men. When people contribute to these stereotypes by distributing or composing memes, they are encouraging the belief that women are inferior to men.

Overly Attached Girlfriend and Good Girl Gina use images of women accompanied by texts depicting actions where the enthymeme drives the audience to believe what is acceptable and unacceptable female behavior. The image of the meme can cause the conclusion professed on the basis

of evidence. Eugene Garver affirms that legitimate enthymemes require an insinuated premise that “causes the conclusion to be asserted on the basis of evidence” (168). If the implied premise cannot cause this to happen, then the rhetor cannot rationally persuade anyone (168). Following Garver’s rationale, memes’ images directly determine one’s conclusion. Similarly, Weaver argues the pathos of enjoying written jokes leads one to inherent acceptance of degrading stereotypes of whoever is perceived as “other” (552). These specific memes’ popularity on the Internet exposes readers to their messages more often than other memes, and their images cause audiences to associate the memes with certain behaviors.

Weaver further asserts that people are attracted to jokes that reinforce a person’s already set beliefs (538). People who are considered “others” are the butt of the joke more often because “others” are referents of humor (548). Many people enjoy the aspect of putting others down in order to feel better about themselves. One can never be sure which side the poster is on, because the true intent of a meme is ambiguous. The ambiguity of jokes conceals insults and allows people to dismiss accusations of sexism—after all, it is “just a joke” (Bemiller and Schneider 460). This guise of humor reiterates the assumption that gender roles should be exploited and that females are less-er than men.

Not only women are affected by the sexism in memes, advice animals about men also encourage men to conform to gender roles. A popular advice animal meme with a male character is Scumbag Steve. He exhibits poor, deviant male behavior; his main themes are “drugs, partying, and other hedonistic behaviors” (“Scumbag Steve”). Through humor, he teaches males how not to behave, and these memes rely on the stereotypical construct that men should be “a real man—sensible, sober, responsible, a decent father, partner, husband” (Kimmel 102). However, the sexism surrounding advice animals with male characters is less acknowledged than female characters because it appears that their themes have been agreed upon as good indicators of masculinity; therefore, male character advice animals need to begin the process that female character memes have already begun.

Even if the stereotypical paradigms in memes are acknowledged, which only occurs when it is egregious, it does minimal depreciation to the meme, so the meme continues to be mass-produced in its sexist context. With content like *Overly Attached Girlfriend* and *Good Girl Gina* rapidly circulating, it reflects the subliminal beliefs of those who produce or dispense memes: the spread of these memes constrain both genders by showing cultural values that perpetuate what roles people are expected to fulfill.

Counter-Meming Sexist Memes

Education is a passive way of solving the problems with memes, but there is an engaging solution already in effect: counter-meming, which is a “deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas” (Knobel and Lankshear 223). If a negative meme is dissimilated by a positive meme, then it enforces better beliefs. Additionally, Grant Kier recommends that “users must seek to understand and respect the original intended meanings behind the symbols that become memes, and to be sure that original meaning is preserved (and/or explained and understood) in the reposting or forwarding of that information” (560). Through the understanding of memes’ original intentions, people may learn to see the issues surrounding them instead of viewing memes for personal enjoyment.

Counter-meming forces people to think critically about what they are reading and putting on the Internet. By targeting destructive memes, people will realize the power and influence they have on readers. Knobel and Lankshear believe counter-meming is a powerful, educational tool that will help people attain knowledge on various social issues (244). Once people learn how to objective-

ly read memes and note the issues with the rhetorical situation, they can produce counter-memes to hinder progress of sexist memes and possibly eradicate them.

Despite the promise of counter-meming, no critics answer what happens when the tactic of confronting stereotypes in memes through counter-meming is unsuccessful. Communities are acknowledging the fallacy of certain memes through counter-meming, but they are not diminishing the amount of stereotyping memes. When people create content challenging stereotypes, they do not receive as much feedback as the other memes. The jokes that are used to undermine stereotypes are simply not as popular. In fact, most people do not know about them at all. For example, Overly Attached Girlfriend has a counter-meme called Misunderstood Girlfriend that uses a normal photograph of the same girl and shows men they are misunderstanding “overly attached” behavior. One meme says, “Follows you to work / You forgot your lunch” (molotov_corndog). Essentially, the explicit premise of this meme is something a good individual would do. The implicit premise revolves back to Overly Attached Girlfriend. While this meme provided a good message, it was unsuccessful. On reddit.com, where Misunderstood Girlfriend originated, the last time one was posted was in May of 2013, which proves the meme does not have a wide or strong audience (erief).

Other counter-memes have achieved some level of success. On reddit.com, when searching “Good Girl Gina” and sorting links by top links of all time, three memes on the first page are counter-memes. One of these counter-meme states, “Cooks/cleans/shows her tits/shuts her mouth when she’s not actively giving you a blowjob / The perfect woman, marry her” (KloverCain). While this meme has gained attention, it and others like it have not done enough to inspire readers to get rid of the ideology that operates Good Girl Gina. The ineffectiveness can be due to the misuse of the enthymeme. The asserted premise of this meme is that the perfect woman does all of those things. However, the audience may not understand it to its fullest potential because the implied premise is that this is what a good girl does; therefore, they often misunderstand the enthymeme and its purpose. Readers can agree with the meme or not fully understand it because the author is using Good Girl Gina as a means of expression. The ill use of the enthymeme relies on the audience to analytically think about the joke to understand it—something people characteristically do not do while reading jokes. As a result, the rhetor is incapable of rationally persuading the audience.

Counter-memes of this kind are unsuccessful because they are applying the enthymeme of the original meme. Misunderstood Girlfriend was futile, and its lack of success could be due to the fact that it was new. Also, Good Girl Gina counter-memes using Good Girl Gina memes to send their messages vis-à-vis the oppressors’ language do not cause revisions of the meme. These findings coincide with Shifman and Thelwall’s study where they found feminist memes were much less successful in every language while proving stereotypical humor is better received (2572–74). Feminist humor ridicules patriarchal culture, which may contribute to it not being widely appreciated.

Therefore, in order to counter-meme effectively, users must use other popular memes to portray their messages. The memes would utilize the archetype the meme possesses, making it easier for the audience to understand the message. One example of a successful counter-meme uses Good Guy Greg, the male version of Good Girl Gina that says, “Makes ‘Good Girl Gina’ meme / Doesn’t use it to perpetuate misogynistic fantasies” (sjam11).¹ This meme is a counter-meme even though it uses an older and different meme because it explicitly accosts the meaning of Good Girl Gina. The expressed message uses the enthymeme to its advantage to establish what the reader should not do creating a successful counter-meme. With the addition of Good Guy Greg, the audience conceptualizes that a good person follows the expressed message. There is no misunderstanding, and the rhetor successfully persuades the audience. This meme has not stopped Good Girl Gina’s misogyny entirely, but it has facilitated audiences to analytically think about this meme by making them recognize its sexism.

Why Do People Make These Memes?

Based on the sexist content of memes, people may develop stronger discriminatory mindsets. When a person devises or distributes a meme, they are saying something about themselves in addition to spreading a message. However, the process of building an online persona only adds to the masses of Internet users attempting to separate themselves from others (DioGiovanna 448). Conformity can be found in memes because they are formulaic; users utilize a meme's enthymeme to generate a meme, and when the memes are based on gender roles, users tend to create sexist content to fit the enthymeme. Readers can effortlessly observe which memes are popular, and by using this information, the reader can become the creator by thinking of something that goes along with the meme's archetype.

People may choose to create controversial matter, like sexist memes, because they wish to have Internet fame, which can rarely develop into real fame. Being offensive is one method people have discovered that easily makes their posts get the most likes, shares, or comments, making their idea "famous." The goal is to be offensive enough to be inadvertently entertaining because most people do not want to get in trouble for trying to be funny (DioGiovanna 446).

However, most people do not create memes; they share them, a way for people to self-validate because they feel included in a popular activity. The sharing of memes revolves around self-esteem; they can make people feel as if they are popular or important by creating or sharing the prevalent, sexist memes.

Conclusion

Sexist advice animal memes are detrimental to people online. They require one to obtain a sexist mentality to find the right conclusion of the joke. Through memes like *Overly Attached Girlfriend* and *Good Girl Gina*, the enthymeme encourages sexist attitudes and gender stereotypes, and these memes' immense popularity will negatively affect people's thought processes about others and gender roles.

However, it is never known for sure if the author is being truthful or sarcastic in their posts due to the anonymity of the Internet. The author's ethos can never be established and no one can be punished if the material is offensive, unlike a comedian at a comedy club. From the ambiguity of the author's meaning, the audience can interpret their messages as funny or offensive, proving how dangerous memes are. Even if a few people find sexist memes humorous, they will continue to disburse them and promote this way of thinking to others.

One way to avoid the confusion about whether or not the author or re-poster is serious about the content is to use counter-memes to eradicate sexist memes. Using the enthymeme, memes accentuate gender roles and promote sexist mentalities. However, online communities can mollify these ideas through counter-meming by using the enthymeme of certain memes to expose their premises. This can be accomplished by creating counter-memes that parody with great finesse so that the enthymeme is utilized to be funny rather than a boring stance on a social or political issue. Another way is by sharing counter-memes on social websites like Facebook, commenting about why the poster is sharing the meme and posing a question to their audience, encouraging discussion.

Online communities need to critically think about their humorous subject matter because they can insinuate more than they originally intended. This goes beyond memes about women; there are memes about class, race, and other social issues that require the attention *Overly Attached Girlfriend* and *Good Girl Gina* urgently need to recognize and eradicate the harmful ideas they are portraying to audiences. Memes are not only a joke—they provide social commentary that other people can be influenced by. They can change an individual's beliefs or even their behavior to be

viewed positively by others. Internet users should learn how to utilize them properly to promote positive ideas, not sexist ideals.

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Stolley and Dr. Mary Beth Tegan for their support and assistance throughout the writing process of this article.

Note

¹ Good Guy Greg often depicts gender-neutral good behavior, but it is meant to demonstrate ideal male behavior.

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