


Psychopathology and social media: Social media triggers in the development of mental disorders

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social networks have become an extension of our existence, shaping interactions and influencing behaviors. This article investigates the impacts of this digital revolution on mental health, examining how excessive use of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can trigger mental disorders. The research explores the triggers present in social networks that foster psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and digital addiction. However, it is essential to recognize that social networks, when well used, can have a positive character, facilitating the connection between people, promoting access to information and offering emotional support. Based on a literature review of relevant studies, this work synthesizes the existing knowledge about the relationship between the use of social networks and mental health, addressing the effects of algorithms, social comparison, and exposure to idealized content. In addition, the implications of these findings for clinical practice and the prevention of mental disorders are discussed, emphasizing the importance of educational interventions, public policies, and digital hygiene strategies. The methodology involved a critical analysis of selected articles through specific descriptors on platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the negative effects of social networks and promote a healthier use of these platforms.

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INTRODUCTION

With the advance of globalization and the ease of access to technologies, the boundaries between societies have become narrower. Today, anyone with access to the internet can connect with individuals from any part of the world instantly. In this context, social networks have emerged as platforms for global connection, allowing the exchange of experiences and the expansion of knowledge. However, these platforms also bring with them negative impacts, especially regarding mental health (Unicef, 2022).

The digital revolution, at its core, refers to the integration and mastery of digital technologies in all areas of human society. From the dawn of the information age, marked by the advent of personal computers and the internet, to the current explosion of mobile devices, the Internet of Things (IoT), and Artificial Intelligence, we have witnessed a series of historical milestones that have shaped our reality. These milestones are not only technological evolutions, but milestones of change in the way we live, work, and relate to each other (Batista, 2024).

One of the most recurring clichés about the digital revolution is that it has plunged us into an "era of change". However, this is even more fascinating: we are living through a significant "change of era". Changes of era are, by definition, distinct. They shake up reality, reconfigure the role of institutions in our minds, and are profoundly emancipatory periods. These moments do not come suddenly, but are established through slow and silent transformations in our behavior. Its impacts permeate social, political, economic, and cultural life, often accompanied by significant technological advances (Camargo, 2015).

An example of this is the change of era that occurred at the end of the 19th century, driven by innovations such as the steam engine. Its effects included urbanization, the massification of education, the popularization of the press, and the universalization of the vote. Many of these effects persist to this day, although some are showing signs of wear and tear due to the digital revolution shaping our current change of era. This new revolution brings to light political movements in social networks, intense conflicts of interest in regulated sectors, such as urban mobility (exemplified by Uber) and telecommunications (exemplified by WhatsApp), in addition to the rapid integration of instant access between people, information, products and services in our daily lives (Camargo, 2015).

While technology connects people regardless of physical borders, it also creates an ongoing sense of "disconnection." With a screen connected to the internet, the world around loses brightness and the attention that would be due to it is no longer the same (Fernandes, 2018). This paradox, amplified by the use of social media, underscores the need to balance digital life and genuine personal interaction, seeking ways to maintain mindfulness and presence in everyday moments. However, more than a technological panacea, what is on the horizon is the outline of our future behavior in relation to personal care.



The logic of social networks, based on algorithms that select content according to user behavior, creates bubble filters that limit the diversity of opinions and encourage reactions to extreme positions. This mechanism contributes to the spread of hate speech, negatively affecting the emotional development of adolescents and young people. In addition, complex topics such as mental health are often treated superficially on social networks, leading to the trivialization of psychopathologies (Unicef, 2022).

Obviously, it is not possible to detail all the changes in behavior, but we can already be sure that social networks awaken triggers that can develop mental disorders. In this context, this study aims to analyze the relationship between the use of social networks and the development of mental disorders, to identify the specific triggers present in social networks that contribute to psychological problems, and to discuss the implications of these findings for clinical practice and the prevention of mental disorders.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the guidelines of Cervo, Bervian and Silva (2007), the present study is categorized as a basic and theoretical research, with the objective of expanding scientific knowledge about the impact of social networks on mental health. This is an exploratory research of a qualitative nature, based on concepts and information extracted from the scientific literature.

This literature review involved a critical and synthetic analysis of relevant studies published on the subject. Using academic and scientific electronic platforms, such as Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science, specific terms were used in the search, such as "social networks", "mental health", "mental disorders" and "digital addiction".

To select the studies, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Articles that addressed aspects related to the impact of social networks on mental health and were available in Portuguese and English were included. Articles without a clear or relevant approach were excluded, as well as those not available in digital format or in languages understandable to the research team.

To elucidate complex issues present in the text, we resorted to specific searches in the Google search engine. This method provided access to new sources of knowledge, following an approach based on scientific and epistemological principles. As emphasized by Rozeira et al. (2023), this methodology allows us to unravel the complexity and unpredictability inherent in scientific research. Each new concept unveiled represents an elemental piece in the incessant search for discernment. In summary, the assimilation of new concepts proved to be essential to strengthen the structure of this scientific study.



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

The use of social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is a relatively recent phenomenon. We are still in the process of fully understanding the effects of this new form of social interaction on different populations. The increase in time devoted to these platforms has been linked to feelings of isolation from the real world, potentially contributing to the development of mental disorders. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 70% of the Brazilian population has access to the internet. In addition, Brazil is the second country that occupies the most time per day on the internet, with an average of 9 hours and 29 minutes daily, of which 3 hours and 34 minutes are used on social media (Abjaude et al., 2020).

The type of content published and consumed on social media has a significant impact on mental health. Many publications reinforce narcissism, living standards, consumption, and status, which has contributed to the increase in the prevalence of various psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Social networks present an idealized cut of reality. People often post photos and share memorable moments that are positive. Consuming this type of content in excess can lead to the impression that the lives of others are superior to our own, especially during periods of mental vulnerability. This exposure to faces, bodies, routines, jobs, travel, and perfect relationships can increase the feeling of personal devaluation, contributing to excessive self-demands and contributing to stress, demotivation, and self-deprecation (Abjaude et al., 2020).

Excessive use of social networks can alter the functioning of the brain, especially with regard to feel-good neurotransmitters. Constant stimuli and positive reinforcements, such as likes and comments, trigger the production of dopamine, a molecule associated with pleasure. This process occurs in an accelerated way and with little brain effort, which can reduce the ability to find pleasure in activities that require more energy, such as interactions in nature. Over time, the offline world's ability to generate pleasure or motivation may decrease (Unimed Campinas, 2024).

The negative effects of social networks are broad and diverse. Excessive use of social media can impair the functioning of the reward system, increasing the need for immediate gratification. This can hinder the ability to deal with frustrations and the need to wait. In addition, excessive stimuli, constant comparison with other people, and impairments in the sleep cycle can increase the risk of developing anxiety disorders. Social media addiction can hinder the maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships in the offline world. People may miss out on opportunities to establish face-to-face contact or spend quality time disconnected. The unattainable beauty standards promoted on social media, often from edited and filtered photos, have a significant impact on self-esteem. This can lead to a loss of authenticity, eating disorders, and depression (Unimed Campinas, 2024).



In this context, we realize that the effects of social networks on mental health are multicausal and complex. While social media cannot be solely responsible for mental disorders, it is clear that they can act as significant triggers. Therefore, it is essential to approach the use of social networks in a conscious and balanced way, seeking to minimize their negative impacts while taking advantage of the benefits that these platforms can offer.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MENTAL DISORDERS: EVIDENCE AND PERSPECTIVES

The relationship between the use of social networks and the development of mental disorders has become a widely explored field of research. Several scientific evidences suggest that, with a genetic predisposition, the excessive use of these platforms can significantly contribute to the emergence of conditions such as depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Recent studies indicate that intensive use of social networks is strongly associated with higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Lin et al. (2016) found that individuals who spend more than two hours a day on social media are twice as likely to report mental health problems compared to those who use these platforms for less time. Corroborating this perspective, a report by the UK's Royal Society for Public Health, published in 2017, ranked Instagram as the most harmful platform for young people's mental health, followed by Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter.

Several mechanisms are proposed to explain this relationship. Social comparison stands out as one of the main factors. The phenomenon of comparing one's own life to the seemingly perfect lives projected on social media can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. A study by Vogel et al. (2014) highlighted that the use of social networks intensifies self-comparison and rumination, contributing to the development of depressive symptoms.

In addition, studies in neuroscience have shown that excessive use of social networks can alter brain functioning. Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) reveals that positive feedback on social media, such as likes and comments, activates the brain's reward centers, releasing dopamine. Montag et al. (2017) indicate that this release of dopamine is similar to that observed in responses to addictive activities, such as gambling and substance use, suggesting that the use of social networks can create a cycle of addiction with negative impacts on mental health.

The use of social networks is also strongly linked to the increase in anxiety disorders. Primack et al. (2017) found that individuals who use multiple social media platforms are three times more likely to develop anxiety symptoms compared to those who use only one or two platforms. The constant need to be up-to-date and respond quickly can generate a feeling of continuous pressure, exacerbating anxiety symptoms.



Another relevant aspect is the interruption of sleep. The use of social networks, especially before bed, is associated with sleep problems. The blue light emitted by mobile devices interferes with the production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for sleep, leading to sleep disorders and, consequently, a negative impact on mental health. Levenson et al. (2017) revealed that adolescents who use social networks excessively have a higher risk of developing sleep problems, which are directly linked to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Recognizing the negative impact of social networks on mental health, several interventions have been proposed. The promotion of "digital hygiene", which includes regular breaks in the use of social networks, the limitation of screen time and the practice of offline activities, is recommended by mental health experts. In addition, public policies aimed at education on the healthy use of social networks and the inclusion of digital education subjects in schools emerge as promising strategies to mitigate the negative effects of these platforms on mental health.

The way social networks are used also adds to this context. Verduyn et al. (2015) differentiated between passive use (browsing without interaction) and active use (interacting and posting content). The results indicated that passive use of social media is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, while active use may in some cases have neutral or even positive effects on mental health. Additionally, the amount of time spent on social media is a critical factor. Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, and Martin (2018) found a correlation between excessive time spent on social media and increased rates of depression and suicide among adolescents. They suggest that more than five hours a day on social media is associated with a significant increase in the risk of depression and suicidal behaviors.

SPECIFIC TRIGGERS PRESENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The influence of social networks on mental health is a complex and comprehensive phenomenon, marked by the presence of several specific triggers that can intensify psychological problems. Among these triggers, social comparison, cyberbullying, the culture of immediacy, misinformation, and cancel culture emerge as factors that negatively impact psychological well-being.

Social comparison is one of the most prevalent and disturbing mechanisms in social media. Festinger (1954) formulated the theory of social comparison, which posits that individuals evaluate their own worth based on comparison with others. Constant exposure to idealized images of success and happiness can lead to deep feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Fardouly et al. (2015) corroborate this perspective, showing that comparison with unrealistic standards of beauty on social



networks is associated with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, especially among young women.

Another significant trigger is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, defined as virtual harassment, is a form of violence that occurs over the internet, encompassing social networks, message groups, and online gaming platforms. It is characterized by repetitive behaviors that aim to humiliate, persecute, intimidate, assault or defame someone. This type of violence has a significant impact on the mental health of young people, as revealed by several studies (Olweus; Limber, 2018).

According to a survey conducted by Unicef, one in three young people in at least 30 countries reported being a victim of cyberbullying. In addition, approximately one in five young people dropped out of school after experiencing cyberbullying (Unicef, 2019). The organization's U-Report points out that social networks are the main places where these episodes occur.

The Unicef survey, which interviewed more than 170 thousand young people from different countries, including Brazil, shows that cyberbullying is a global problem, affecting young people from different cultures in a similar way. In Brazil, 37% of adolescents reported having been victims of cyberbullying, and 36% said they had missed school after suffering violence in the virtual environment. These numbers highlight Brazil as one of the countries with the highest incidence of cyberbullying among young people (Unicef, 2019).

One notable aspect of the study is young people's perception of who should be responsible for tackling cyberbullying. Among those interviewed, 32% believe that the responsibility lies with the government, 31% consider that young people themselves should act against the problem, while 29% think that the companies that own social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, should be the main responsible. Thus, it becomes obvious that social networks have become a breeding ground for harmful behaviors such as sending threatening messages and public humiliation.

Tokunaga (2010) demonstrates that victims of cyberbullying face a notable increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety, exacerbated by the public and persistent nature of digital attacks. Hinduja and Patchin (2018) reinforce this view, associating the experience of cyberbullying with an increase in social isolation and suicidal thoughts among adolescents, highlighting the devastating impact of online harassment.

Suicide is an extremely sensitive topic, often associated with the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Cyberharassment can be even more impactful than traditional bullying due to its reach and the permanence of exposure on the internet, which can lead the victim to make extreme decisions.

The power of exposure provided by the internet allows attacks to be widely publicized and difficult to forget, exacerbating the victim's feelings of shame, humiliation and failure. This constant



remembrance and visibility of the attacks can intensify emotional distress, leading some victims to consider suicide as a way out.

Overall, suicide can be a reaction to the overwhelming feelings of despair and powerlessness that result from cyberbullying. The impossibility of reversing the consequences of online exposure can make the victim see suicide as the only viable solution to escape the pain and continuous humiliation. The psychological impact of cyberbullying is profound and long-lasting, highlighting the urgent need for effective interventions to prevent such tragedies (Olweus; Limber, 2018).

The culture of immediacy on social networks, characterized by the pressure to always be connected and available, also contributes to psychological problems. The phenomenon of "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO), described by Przybylski et al. (2013), illustrates how the constant need to keep up to date with other people's events and activities can generate stress and anxiety. The pressure to respond quickly and the worry that you might miss out on important experiences create a state of digital hypervigilance, which can lead to feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion.

In the professional context, FOMO can manifest itself as the habit of constantly monitoring workgroup messages and notifications, even outside working hours. This behavior interferes with moments of leisure, which are important for resting the body and mind and for stimulating creativity. As recent studies point out, the need to always be connected to work can lead to mental and physical exhaustion, reducing productivity and increasing the risk of stress-related disorders (Smith et al., 2019).

In personal life, FOMO is related to the perception that other people are having more satisfying experiences, which generates a compulsion to constantly check for updates on social media (Pagno, 2023). This continuous comparison can negatively affect self-esteem, leading to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's life (Thompson & Loughheed, 2012). The popular saying "the grass is always greener on the other side" illustrates this distorted perception well.

Neurologically, the behavior associated with FOMO activates the release of dopamine in two areas of the brain. In the central region, dopamine provides a feeling of pleasure; in the prefrontal area, it influences impulse control and behavior. These mechanisms explain why constantly checking notifications can generate a temporary feeling of satisfaction, followed by a continuous desire for more stimuli (Pagno, 2023).

Incessant checking of notifications and the exaggerated use of social networks are associated with several mental disorders, including anxiety, attention deficit and stress. In addition, they can lead to digital addiction, a state in which the individual feels the constant need to be connected. In severe cases, this dependence can progress to more serious conditions, such as Burnout Syndrome or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Pagno (2023) highlights that "the person feels overstimulated all



the time, cannot rest" and observes an increase in the prevalence of concentration difficulties among patients.

Another factor to consider is the impact of the content consumed. The consumption of negative content or fake news can amplify feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. Garrett (2019) noted that frequent exposure to negative news and false information on social media is associated with a significant increase in anxiety and stress levels among users. The spread of misinformation, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has exacerbated stress and feelings of insecurity among users, as evidenced by Pennycook et al. (2020). The confusion generated by contradictory and alarmist news contributes to a continuous state of anxiety and fear.

Cancel culture, a growing phenomenon on social media, also stands out as a major trigger. The practice of publicly denouncing and shunning individuals can have severe psychological consequences. Clark (2020) notes that people targeted by cancellation campaigns face a significant increase in stress, anxiety, and depression, a result of exposure to public criticism and humiliation. This virtual environment, where private issues become public spectacles, amplifies the emotional and psychological impact on affected individuals.

CLINICAL PRACTICE AND THE PREVENTION OF MENTAL DISORDERS

The growing scientific evidence on the impact of social networks on mental health reveals significant implications for both clinical practice and strategies for the prevention of mental disorders. As the effects of social media on psychological health become more evident, there is a need to adapt therapeutic approaches and develop effective preventive interventions.

Recent findings on the influence of social networks provide new insights that can transform clinical practice. Recognition of the specific mechanisms by which social networks affect mental health allows for more precise targeting of therapeutic interventions.

Several studies point to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as the most effective approach to help individuals who face the negative effects associated with the use of social networks. Studies show that CBT can be adapted to address issues related to social comparison and digital addiction, helping individuals develop a healthier relationship with digital platforms (Moukaddam & Shah, 2017). Integrating techniques that directly address the influence of social media on self-esteem and self-perception can significantly improve therapeutic outcomes. The personalization of treatment, taking into account the patient's digital profile, allows for an approach centered on individual needs.

In addition to therapeutic interventions, digital education and media literacy are important strategies to mitigate the negative effects of social networks. According to a Unicef report (2019), educational programs that teach children and adolescents about the safe and critical use of social networks can reduce the risks associated with excessive use and exposure to harmful content. These



programs can help cultivate a more balanced relationship with social media, promoting a safer and healthier digital environment.

Clinical practice should incorporate the assessment of patterns of social media use, given their impact on mental health. The literature suggests that social comparison and positive feedback on social media are strongly associated with depressive and anxious symptoms (Vogel et al., 2014; Montag et al., 2017). Incorporating questions about social media use and its emotional consequences into clinical assessments can provide a more complete understanding of the sources of stress and contribute to a more accurate diagnosis.

The intersection between social media use and anxiety disorders, as well as sleep problems, demands a clinical approach that includes strategies to improve sleep hygiene and anxiety management. Evidence indicates that the use of mobile devices before bed and the pressure to stay constantly connected are associated with sleep disturbances and an increase in anxiety symptoms (Primack et al., 2017; Levenson et al., 2017). Interventions that promote healthy sleep practices and relaxation techniques can be crucial in mitigating these adverse effects.

In light of the findings on the impacts of social media, a number of prevention strategies can be implemented to protect mental health, especially among young people, who are particularly vulnerable, as detailed in Box 01.

Chart 1: Strategies to Mitigate Digital Dependence

Strategy	Description
Set clear boundaries	Establish specific times to check emails and social networks, avoiding use outside these periods.
Establish a Usage Goal	Have a time limit to spend on social networks, taking care not to stay on them for too long.
Focus on Face-to-Face Life	Leave your cell phone away when you are talking, working, during meals or watching a movie, to enjoy the moment with 100% attention.
Practice offline activities	Engaging in hobbies and activities that do not involve the use of digital devices.
Turn off notifications	Limit push notifications to reduce ongoing disruption caused by alerts of new content.
Curate	Keep in your networks only pages and people that bring feelings of peace and tranquility and edifying content.
Have a critical sense	Remember that the networks only show a positive (and edited) cut of people's lives. Do not make comparisons taking what you see there as reality.

Source: The authors.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, digital education and media literacy are essential for preventing the negative effects of social networks. According to the Unicef report (2019), the implementation of educational programs that teach children and adolescents about the safe and critical use of social networks can significantly reduce the risks associated with excessive



use. Teaching skills for discerning misinformation and managing social comparison can help cultivate a more balanced relationship with social media.

Promoting "digital hygiene" practices is essential to prevent mental disorders associated with excessive use of social networks. Setting clear boundaries for screen time and incorporating regular breaks can help maintain a healthy balance (Twenge et al., 2018). Education about the importance of offline time and the practice of alternative activities can be an effective strategy to reduce the negative impact of prolonged use of social networks.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE TRIVIALIZATION OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGIES

We have already seen that the growing use of social networks is inevitable and has had a great impact on the way psychopathologies are perceived and discussed. The ease with which information is shared on these platforms enables both the dissemination of knowledge and the spread of misinformation. In this scenario, technical terms and psychiatric diagnoses are often used inappropriately, contributing to the trivialization of mental disorders.

The logic of social networks, based on algorithms that select content according to user behavior, creates bubble filters that limit the diversity of opinions and encourage reactions to extreme positions. This mechanism contributes to the spread of hate speech, negatively affecting the emotional development of adolescents and young people. In addition, complex topics such as mental health are often treated superficially on social networks, leading to the trivialization of psychopathologies (Fernandes, 2018; Unicef, 2022).

The trivialization of mental disorders can be seen as an inappropriate appropriation of knowledge about them. Access to information, although positive, can lead to the inappropriate use of technical terms without proper context, resulting in their loss of meaning. In this way, experiences of psychological distress are trivialized and seen as common characteristics, ignoring the seriousness of mental disorders.

Examples of this trivialization are common on social networks, where expressions such as "I have OCD" or "I am depressed" are used lightly to describe organized behaviors or fleeting feelings of sadness. This trivialization makes it difficult to understand the severity of mental disorders, blurring the line between clinical symptoms and everyday experiences of anxiety or mood swings (Unicef, 2022).

The glamorization of certain mental disorders in movies, series, and social networks also contributes to risky behaviors, such as self-medication. The dissemination of distorted content on blogs and other platforms can romanticize eating disorders and self-harm, treating these behaviors irresponsibly.



It is relevant to understand that the diagnosis of mental disorders is a complex process that requires time, research, and the guidance of qualified health professionals. Self-knowledge is important, but self-diagnosis based on superficial information can be dangerous. Identifying with characteristics presented on social networks can be a starting point for seeking specialized help, but it should not be considered a final diagnosis.

Mental health professionals play a key role in raising awareness and providing accurate information about mental disorders. Overcoming the trivialization of psychopathologies requires a joint effort: constant updating of health professionals, responsibility of content creators and dissemination of solid and true information.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social networks have radically transformed the way we connect and interact, offering undeniable benefits in terms of communication and access to information. However, the negative impacts of these platforms on mental health cannot be ignored. This article highlighted the complexity of the effects of social networks, highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach to mitigate their risks.

It is imperative that we recognize the specific triggers present in social media that contribute to psychological problems, such as social comparison, the spread of misinformation, and digital addiction. Digital platforms, with their algorithms designed to maximize engagement, often encourage behaviors that can lead to mental disorders. Connectivity should be a bridge to understanding, not a chasm to mental health.

Educating users about media and digital literacy is an essential strategy. Teaching skills to identify and avoid misinformation, manage social comparison, and practice robust "digital hygiene" can significantly reduce the negative impacts of social media. Setting clear boundaries for social media use and promoting offline activities are key to maintaining psychological balance. True connection begins when we disconnect from screens and reconnect with ourselves.

Social media has the power to bring people together, share knowledge, and inspire positive change. However, it is a collective responsibility to ensure that these benefits are not overshadowed by mental health risks. Balance is the key: let's use social networks as tools for connection and growth, not as sources of stress and personal devaluation.

Ultimately, the success of our social media interactions will depend on our ability to integrate education, public policy, and psychological support into a concerted effort to promote healthier and more conscious use of these platforms. The digital revolution will only be complete when we balance technological innovation with human well-being.



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