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Consumer Behaviour: Consuming rabbit meat among Malaysians

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Abstract

This study explores rabbit meat consumption among Malaysians as an alternative protein source. Rabbit meat is rich in nutritional value and is easy to breed, making it a potential substitute. Concerns related to empathy for animals and association of rabbits with pet's influence resistance to its consumption. This study aims to contribute to understanding Malaysian consumer behaviour related to consuming rabbit meat. Questionnaires were distributed to 241 respondents from different states in Malaysia. A non-probability sampling technique selects participants based on accessibility and willingness to participate. It is found that respondents' frequency of eating rabbits differs according to socioeconomic background.

Keywords: rabbit meat, consumer behavior, alternative protein, consumer readiness, meat consumption.

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1.0 Introduction

The rabbit industry in Malaysia is still relatively new compared to other livestock industries. Even though rabbits have been considered pets in Malaysia for many years, the large-scale production of rabbit meat is still in their infancy. Looking at its gap and its possibility to ensure food security in Malaysia, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries encourages young entrepreneurs to venture into rabbit meat production due to its high and increasing demand. It also can be used as an alternative to beef and mutton as protein sources (BERNAMA, 2020). Although there is a growing demand for rabbit meat in Malaysia, a study by Muhammad et al., (2023) found that there is still a misconception among Malaysians about rabbit meat, especially when they believe that the meat does not affect the health and well-being of consumers. Various nutrients are available in the meat, far more significant than in other poultry such as chicken and beef.

Rabbit meat has tremendous benefits. It is considered a nutritious meat with lower fat content, lower cholesterol, and less saturated fatty acids than other meats. Besides, it has excellent nutritive and dietetic properties (Dalle Zotte & Szendro, 2011; Hermida et al., 2006; Williams, 2007), which make them highly recommended by nutritionists over other meats because of its richness with proteins of high biological value, minerals, and vitamins (Gabriela et al., 2014). Therefore, it can prevent consumers from vascular diseases with positive influences on human health conditions (Abd-Allah & Abdelaziz, 2018). Additionally, they support adult brain maintenance and kid brain and visual development (Honrado et al., 2022) contain high biological value proteins as well, giving the body all the necessary amino acids, particularly lysine and threonine, also contains high biological value proteins as well, giving the body all the necessary amino acids, particularly lysine and threonine (Dalle Zotte & Szendro, 2011). In addition, meat is a good source of potassium, phosphorus, and

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selenium, minerals involved in the regulation of several physiological activities, and is low in sodium, preventing excessive blood pressure (Dalle Zotte & Szendro, 2011).

Thus, this study aims to understand the consumer preferences for rabbit meat to assist local producers and government agencies. It focuses on respondents who have consumed rabbit meat before and examines their socioeconomic background. The study also explores their perceptions of rabbit meat, particularly regarding tastiness and price.

2.0 Literature Review

The poultry industry in Malaysia, which has long played a vital role in providing meat sources for Malaysians, has encountered various challenges that have impacted the accessibility and affordability of poultry products. One of the critical challenges is the surge in prices of essential raw materials, mainly animal feed, resulting in escalated production costs. Consequently, these increased costs have transformed into higher retail prices for conventional meat, which is chicken, a widely consumed protein source deeply ingrained in the Malaysian diet (Para et al., 2015). In 2022 the impact of global food price increases on Malaysia's poultry industry which had increased 11.9% in supply-chain cost, gave a significant concern by the government as it affected both producers and consumer (Krinstitute, 2022). The significant increase in poultry-related expenses has prompted researchers and policymakers to actively explore alternative protein sources to address the country's nutritional requirements and alleviate the strain on traditional poultry production systems (Li et al., 2018).

This imperative drive to seek alternative solutions aims to ensure a sustainable and secure food supply while mitigating the adverse effects of rising costs on consumers and the poultry industry. Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries had supported young entrepreneurs in rabbit meat production as it had showed the shorter production cycle, lower operating costs and fast return as one of the strategies to curb increases in cost in poultry industry in Malaysia (The Star, 2020). Rabbit meat has emerged as a promising alternative due to its distinctive nutritional profile, making it a relevant addition to promoting alongside current healthy lifestyle practices (Bodnar & Skobrak, 2014). Its chemical composition distinguished it from other meats, offering a range of advantages. Rabbit meat is renowned for its high protein content while being low in cholesterol, fat, and sodium (Priyanti & Raharjo, 2012). In particular, rabbit fat boasts a notably low proportion of cholesterol and a high proportion of unsaturated fatty acids, further contributing to its nutritional appeal (Hermida et al., 2006). In addition, rabbit meat is easy to digest and is known for its rich flavour.

Plus, Petrescu and Petrescu-Mag (2018) state that rabbit meat reveals opportunities for marketers to adjust their interest to consumers' needs and, at the same time, to respond to economic efficiency and environmental protection needs. Accordingly, previous studies show that Malaysians accept rabbit meat because most respondents recognize and appreciate the potential health benefits and advantages. They acknowledge its low-fat content, high protein value, and overall nutritional value, signifying an increasing awareness and acceptance of rabbit meat as a viable protein source among Malaysians; however, there are challenges with socio-cultural factors, such as empathy towards animals and the association of rabbits with pets. Ethical considerations about empathy for animals and the perception of rabbits as beloved pets have emerged as significant factors that influence resistance towards rabbit meat consumption (Idris et al., 2023). In conclusion, Malaysians are aware but not fully ready to accept rabbit meat as an alternative protein source.

The government also should play their roles as stated by Muhammad et al (2023), to give more incentives and subsidies for rabbit meat producers, especially in rural areas, to produce and supply more rabbit meat in the market. If the supply is increasing tremendously, the price of rabbit meat can be reduced as the market is not controlled by a few suppliers. Subsidies are highly needed for rural producers to expand their business, not only by producing meats but also by producing end products that can be exposed to local and international markets. The demand is promising, if with the help from various sectors in the economy. The ASEAN Halal Meat Cluster Development Plan by the Malaysian Government is the best platform for government agencies such as Federal Land Development (FELDA) to take off this plan for the rabbit meat industry. Providing significant financial and research support as part of marketing awareness promotion and educational programs can significantly promote rabbit meat among Malaysians. FELDA launched the Settler Development Program (PPP) to improve its third-generation settlers for other economic activities and the plan should consider farming rabbit meat as part of settlers' backyard farming activities. In addition, active and strong promotional and educational programs between the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) Malaysia and with Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) Malaysia that focus on the benefits of farming rabbit meat among small-scale enterprises could lead to an increment of rabbit meat producers, while Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost Living (KPDN) Malaysia should highlight aggressively in their all-year.

Siddiqui et al (2023) suggest that the education of consumers using social media could improve their knowledge of the nutrients of rabbit meat. Further communications and marketing techniques such as education on the cooking knowledge required to cook and prepare rabbit meat both for daily usage and complex recipes for important events could be developed to assist the resumption of the meat of rabbits both in typical and starred hotels. To increase the availability of rabbit meat on the market, the innovation of ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat products makes rabbit meat products with convenience features. The product characteristics should be improved to increase the market for rabbit meat. The excellent nutritional properties of rabbit meat can be further improved by the enrichment of the animals' diets with natural feed.

3.0 Methodology

The survey consists of a set of structured questions that were designed to collect data on the perception of Malaysian consumers about rabbit meat. All survey questions were adopted and adapted from Petrescu & Petrescu-Mag (2018). The data of this study are generated from responses to questionnaires completed in an actual survey with 241 respondents from different states in Malaysia. The participants

were selected using the convenience sampling technique. It is a non-probability sampling technique that selects participants based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. The purpose of collecting feedback from various geographical stated and different socioeconomic backgrounds, it is believed that this study can provide a variety of answers to why Malaysians are reluctant to buy and consume rabbit meat products. The questionnaires were distributed from Jun 2022 to December 2022, and they were administered to participants via email and social media platforms. All participants were given a specific time frame to complete the survey. In ensuring ethical considerations are met, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their rights, and the procedures involved. The participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

We employ SPSS 22 to conduct frequency analysis and descriptive analysis. Frequency analysis is used to extract the percentile of the profiles of respondents in terms of their age, gender, occupation, marital status, resident state, household dependent, religion, education level, race, and household income. Mean and standard deviation are computed for descriptive analysis.

4.0 Research Findings

Table 1 represents the profile of respondents in age, gender, current occupation, marital status, resident state, number of household dependents, religion, education level, race, and household income per month.

There are 241 respondents in total, with seven groups of ages between 21 and 50. Most respondents are from age 21 to 25 with 23%, following age 46 to 50 with 17% and age between 36 to 40 with 16%. Ten percent come from the age group between 26 to 30, 31 to 35, and 51 and above. The least respondents are from ages between 41 to 45, with 7 percent. Based on gender, the female respondents are 55%, and males are 45 percent. For occupation, the study is divided into seven groups: homemaker (5.13%), student (20.09%), employed full-time (49.56%), employed part-time (2.14%), retired (4.27%), self-employed (18.38%) and unable to work (0.43%). In marital status, married status contributes to 60%, followed by single (36%), and 2% in divorced and widowed.

Different states are spotted among respondents. With 15 states including two from Wilayah Persekutuan, the majority respondents are from Selangor with 28%, Pahang (16%), Melaka (13%), Johor (12%), Negeri Sembilan (10%), Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (7%), 3% from Perak and Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya, Kedah and Kelantan is 2%, Terengganu and Sarawak is 1% and 0 from Pulau Pinang and Sabah.

For household dependents, the majority of respondents are from 3 to 5 dependents (46%), 1 to 2 dependents 27%, 6 to 8 dependents 26% and 1% more than 8 dependents. From the religious background, most respondents are Muslims (98.76%), and Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism are 0.41%, respectively. Regarding education level, most respondents have a bachelor's degree (44%), followed by STPM/Diploma or matriculation holders with 27%, SPM and below certificate with 14%, postgraduate holders with 12%, and professional certificates with 4%. As for the race, 98% of respondents are Malay, 1% are Bumiputera (other than Malays), and 0% is from Chinese and Indian.

Refer to the household income per month, most respondents represent from RM2,500 to RM 4,500 income per month 26%, followed by 23% in RM2,500 and below income, 13% in RM4,501 to RM6,500, 12% in RM8501 to RM10,000, 9% in RM14,000 and above, 7% in RM8501 to RM10,000, 6% in RM10,001 to RM12,000 and 3% in RM12,000 to RM14,000.

Table 1: Profile of respondents.

Demographic variables		Percentage of respondents (%)
Age	21-25	23
	26-30	10
	31-35	10
	36-40	16
	41-45	7
	46-50	17
	51 and above	10
	Below 21	7
Gender	Female	55
	Male	45
Occupation	Homemaker	5.13
	Student	20.09
	Employed full-time	49.56
	Employed part-time	2.14
	Retired	4.27
	Self-employed	18.38
	Unable to work	0.43
Marital status	Divorced	2
	Married	60
	Single	36
	Widowed	2
Resident state	Johor	12
	Kedah	2
	Kelantan	2
	Melaka	13
	Negeri Sembilan	10
	Pahang	16

	Perak	3
	Perlis	1
	Pulau Pinang	0
	Sabah	0
	Sarawak	1
	Selangor	28
	Terengganu	1
	Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	7
	Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya	3
Household dependent	1-2	27
	3-5	46
	6-8	26
	More than 8	1
Religion	Buddhism	0.41
	Christianity	0.41
	Hinduism	0.41
	Islam	98.76
Education level	Bachelor's degree	44
	Postgraduate degree	12
	Professional certificate	4
	SPM and below	14
	STPM/Diploma/Matriculation	27
Race	Bumiputera (other than Malays)	1
	Chinese	0
	Indian	0
	Malay	98
Household income (per month)	2,500 and below	23%
	2,500 – 4,500	26
	4,501 – 6,500	13
	6,501 – 8,500	7
	8,501 – 10,000	12
	10,001 – 12,000	6
	12,001 – 14,000	3
	14,001 and above	9

4.1 Rabbit Meat Consumption Habits

Based on the rabbit meat consumption in Table 2, the study showed that all 241 samples ate poultry in the past six months and ate rabbits before. Among the surveyed, 70% responded that they had eaten rabbit meat before but didn't remember the frequency of consumed rabbit meat; 10% responded they had eaten it last month, and others had eaten it last week, four months ago, six months ago, and 12 months ago, with 5% respectively. When the samples were divided into states, samples from Selangor (28%) consumed more rabbit meat than other states. While referring to economic background, in terms of age, samples that consume more rabbit meat are aged between 21 and 25, with 23% and 55% of females consuming rabbit meat. In terms of occupation, employed full-time consumed more rabbit meat with 49.56%, followed by students (20.09%), self-employed (18.38%), homemakers (5.13%), retired (4.27%), employed part-time (2.14%) and least consume rabbit meat is from unable to work with 0.43%. For marital status, married samples consumed 60% higher than other states. Based on education level, a bachelor's degree (44%) is higher than another education level, with the least being a professional certificate, with 4%. In the household income, it is found that samples from RM2,500 to RM 4,500 income per month with 26% is higher compared to other income samples.

Table 2: Past Consumption of Rabbit Meat					
Do you eat any poultry in the past 6 months?					
Yes					Grand Total
241					241
Have you eat rabbit meat before?					
Yes					Grand Total
241					241
When was the last time you ate rabbit me?					
Last week	Last month	Last 4 months ago	Last 6 months ago	Last 12 months ago	Cannot remember (but I have ate rabbit meat before)
5%	10%	5%	5%	5%	70%

Compared with the different meat types, Table 3 showed that chicken is the most consumed by the samples who ate chicken (mean=4.27) between 1 and 4 days per week, followed by beef with mean=3.19, which indicates between 1 and 3 days per month. With mean = 2.53, sheep, goat, and rabbit meat are consumed rarely more than one day per month. Thus, chicken is the favourite of many Malaysians.

Table 3: Consumption Frequency of Different Meat Types (Average Scores For The Sample)

	Chicken	Beef	Sheep/Goat	Rabbit
MEAN*	4.27	3.19	2.53	2.02

*Average sample score, calculated using the individual estimations provided by consumers, coded on the scale: 1=never (minimum level), 2=More rarely than one day per month, 3=Between 1 and 3 days per month, 4=Between 1 and 4 days per week, 5=Between 5 and 7 days per week (maximum level).

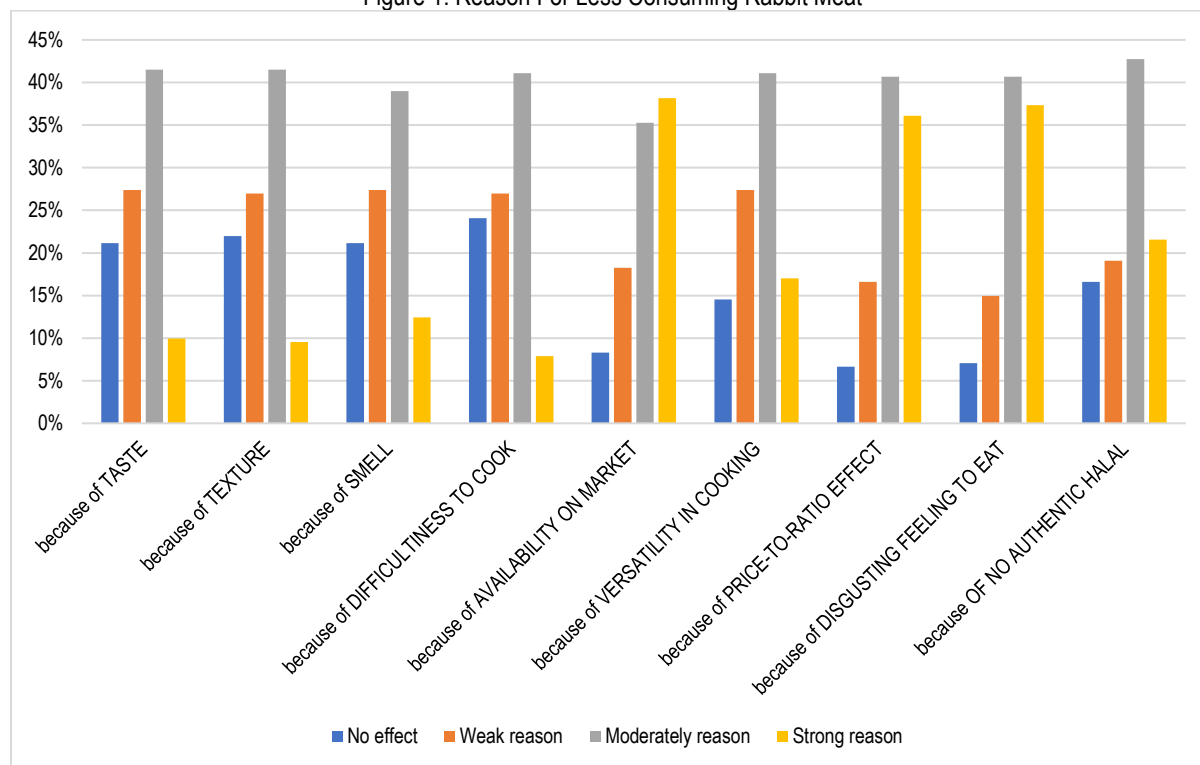
As in Table 4, samples simplify the perceptions of rabbit meat based on taste and price compared with the other meat types. Regarding the tastiness of rabbit meat, chicken is the most samples voted for equal taste with 61%, followed by beef (56%) and sheep/goat (51%). This is supported in Figure 1, as the finding shows that 40% voted as a moderate reason for the taste. Regarding prices, 44% of the samples stated that rabbit meat is more expensive than chicken, 40% stated rabbit meat is more expensive than sheep/goats, and 35% indicated rabbit meat is more expensive than beef.

Table 4: Perceptions of rabbit meat's main characteristics (taste, and price) compared to other types of meat.

Tastiness of rabbit meat compared to:	Less tasty	Equally tasty	Tastier	Grand Total
Chicken meat	9%	61%	30%	100%
Beef meat	13%	56%	30%	100%
Sheep/Goat meat	16%	51%	33%	100%
How cheap is rabbit meat compared to:	Cheaper	Equally priced	More expensive	Grand Total
Chicken meat	33%	23%	44%	100%
Beef meat	14%	51%	35%	100%
Sheep/Goat meat	19%	41%	40%	100%

As mentioned in Table 4, the perceptions of rabbit meat based on taste and prices, in Figure 1, the samples testify the reason for consuming rabbit meat based on taste, texture, smell, difficulties to cook, availability on the market, versatility in cooking, price to ratio effect disgusting feeling to eat and halal certification. Most of the samples showed moderate reasons for not eating rabbit meat, between 38% to nearly 45% in terms of taste, texture, smell, difficulties in cooking, versatility in cooking, price-to-ratio effect, disgusting feeling to eat, and halal certification. Only availability on the market showed about 35% moderate reason and agree with a strong reason for not eating rabbit meat because of availability on the market.

Figure 1: Reason For Less Consuming Rabbit Meat



5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, with all the 241 samples, the study shows that Malaysians have eaten rabbit meat before. Based on the demographic

analysis, the majority of respondents who consumed rabbit meat were young adults aged between 21 and 25, predominantly female, and employed full-time. Most of them held at least a bachelor's degree and had household incomes ranging between RM2,500 and RM4,500. These findings suggest that younger, educated, and economically active individuals are more open to trying alternative protein sources such as rabbit meat. Additionally, Selangor recorded the highest number of respondents, showing a geographical concentration in rabbit meat consumption patterns that may be influenced by better market access or availability.

The consumption data revealed that although all respondents had tried rabbit meat at some point, regular consumption stays low. While chicken and beef remain the dominant meat choices, rabbit meat is perceived as less often consumed due to several factors. These include taste, cooking difficulty, availability in the market, and higher perceived pricing. Even though a considerable number of respondents stated that rabbit meat was equally tasty as chicken or beef, the unfamiliarity and inconvenience in preparation seem to affect their overall willingness to consume it more often.

Consumer perceptions showed that moderate concerns such as taste, smell, price, and lack of halal certification influenced the decision to consume rabbit meat. However, the most significant barrier appears to be market availability. This highlights the need for strategic interventions from producers and policymakers to improve distribution channels and pricing structures. Increasing product accessibility, especially in urban centres like Selangor where demand appears promising, could help shift rabbit meat from an occasional choice to a more regular protein alternative among Malaysian consumers.

5.1 Recommendations

As for recommendations, awareness and educational programs should be conducted for Malaysians on the benefits of consuming rabbit meat products. Among the great promotional tools are television shows and short videos that broadcast ways to cook rabbit meat, together with their benefits. Rabbit meat itself has a reputation for being tough and gamey. It might discourage people from experimenting with it in the kitchen. Therefore, it is necessary to educate consumers via videos, TV shows, or other means on the proper methods of preparing and cooking it, especially in educating the market the significant benefits in terms of health and cost saving in comparative to other protein meat.

Since rabbit meat production in Malaysia is at infant stage, findings from this study able to assist marketers particularly local rabbit meat producer to segment their target market and develop short- and long-term marketing strategies to penetrate the markets. Thus, understanding the needs of consumers is fundamental to designing the features of the product. In particular, consumers could be segmented according to lifestyles or food choice motives to identify aspects that influence the choice of rabbit meat. Moreover, the local origin of rabbit meat would represent an important lever to improve the social, environmental, and economic sustainability of the food system. Products with organic certification, which guarantees higher standards for animal welfare and environmental safeguards, might also be appreciated by consumers. The findings could help the stakeholders, including the customer chain to develop a strategy to increase rabbit meat consumption. All these product strategies coupled with information campaigns to improve consumers' knowledge of the positive characteristics of rabbit meat could contribute to market development.

For future growth in rabbit meat industry, Malaysia agencies and researchers should explore the government strategic interventions by looking into financial support mechanism including incentives and subsidies. This effort should be rural based prioritized for rabbit meat producers in ensuring larger participation in supply chains. By increasing the capacity in production at the grassroots phase, supply chain for rabbit meat could be more stable and affordable, at the same time reduce the dependency on smaller suppliers.

Future studies should shift the attention to study the potential of integrating rabbit meat production into broader rural development initiatives which include backyard farming and agro-entrepreneurship programs under government-led agencies. This directly supports the achievement of SDG in enhancing economic scale among the rural areas. The theme in investigating effectiveness of coordinated promotional and educational programs should be the future direction for researchers. These suggestions of research direction could enhance the awareness and acceptance of rabbit meat as the alternative protein source in Malaysia. Collaborating with relevant government departments and agencies to design community-based training sessions, awareness campaigns and nationwide promotional strategies should also be the focus in academician and researchers.

Exploring product innovation development and consumer educations strategies by researchers may expand the appeal and accessibility of rabbit meat process and production. The research and development (R&D) like ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat may be tailored to modern's consumer lifestyles that also look for healthier food preparations. Studying the versatility in digital and social media in educating the public on the health benefits of rabbit meat and culinary versatility should also be the focus area in rabbit meat research. By integrating several scopes of rabbit meat studies, rich and in-depth information in increasing Malaysia consumer's acceptance of rabbit meat may speed up the product life cycle to better growing stage.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The findings discovered that understanding consumer behaviour related to rabbit meat can change behaviour patterns toward a more sustainable market. The transfer of this knowledge to marketers mainly focuses on increasing consumer satisfaction with rabbit meat. It

is the leverage for designing successful businesses regarding market re-orientation, development, or even reduction of health costs. It also contributes to the body of knowledge where it explores the perception and acceptance of rabbit meat as a substitute for other meat and a protein source among Malaysians. It reveals that while awareness of its nutritional value exists, socio-cultural factors challenge widespread consumption. Interventions and education campaigns are recommended to promote its acceptance as an alternative protein source in Malaysia.

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