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# What Matters in Manuscript Submission? A Look at Factors behind the Submission Decisions of Higher Learning Institution Lecturers in Tanzania

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## ABSTRACT

Submitting manuscripts for publication consideration is a challenging yet essential task for lecturers seeking promotion to higher ranks in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. This study investigated the factors considered by lecturers in the manuscript submission process within Tanzanian higher learning institutions. The findings indicate that a journal's reputation and publishing speed are the most critical factors. These are followed by the relevance of the journal's audience, its peer review process, and access to its metrics. The study emphasizes the importance of scholarly communication and recommends that academic institutions provide training and workshops to enhance awareness of journal selection criteria. Furthermore, universities should establish support mechanisms, like research publication committees to assist scholars in scholarly writing. Additionally, it advocates for academic and publishing bodies to streamline the peer review and publication processes while maintaining rigorous quality standards. Strengthening links to scholarly networks will also enhance research visibility and academic discourse.

## KEYWORDS

Academic librarians; manuscript submission; academic writing; The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy; Institute of Finance Management

## Introduction

Conducting research and disseminating its findings to key stakeholders is a crucial role that academia plays in the solving of societal problems and advancement of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Researchers must determine how to write and submit their manuscripts to communicate research findings effectively. The manuscript produced must meet scholarly standards in terms of structure, language, and style; as these are key to well-indexed peer-reviewed journals' manuscript acceptance.<sup>2</sup> Success in publication largely depends on following established academic norms,<sup>3</sup> which positions academic librarians at the heart of research practices in higher learning institutions. By providing publishing education through seminars and training, librarians serve as a vital link between researchers' ideas and the final published work, making it accessible to users and key research stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, Boufarss and Harviainen<sup>5</sup> emphasize that librarians equip scholars with research writing skills. However, while literature emerging from various parts of the world confirms that librarians play this role, it is unclear if the same is done by academic librarian working for Tanzanian higher education libraries. In response to this lack of clarity, this study has investigated the role played by librarians in supporting the research activities of higher learning institution lecturers in Tanzania to get their works published. Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, and Gilbert<sup>6</sup> noted that the scholarly publication landscape continues to grow in complexity, presenting researchers with ever-increasing dilemmas regarding journal choice. This underscores the crucial role that librarians can play in guiding

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researchers through the complexities of the publication process and helping them make informed decisions.

## Review of literature

The decision-making process when submitting a manuscript for publication is multifaceted. This is because there are various factors that influence authors' choices of the journals to target. In addition to the quality of manuscripts, researchers also have to make additional considerations to ensure that their manuscripts are published. Various studies have examined these factors and revealed common themes and notable differences in how they impact the submission process.

For instance, Heintzelman and Nocetti<sup>7</sup> in their study titled "Where Should We Submit Our Manuscript? An Analysis of Journal Submission Strategies," noted that even high-quality manuscripts face acceptance difficulties due to external factors. In this study, these scholars also pointed out that journals often struggle with high volumes of submissions, limited review capacity, and space constraints, making it challenging for authors to secure publication, regardless of their manuscripts' merit. This highlights a major issue within the publishing ecosystem that means that authors must navigate not only the academic rigor demands of their work, but also operational inefficiencies within journals. While these limitations are understandable, they contribute to the complexity of manuscript submission, requiring authors to exercise greater discernment in selecting journals that are neither overburdened with submissions nor plagued by prolonged review periods. Academic librarians have played an increasingly important role in supporting lecturers through this process, particularly in identifying suitable journal outlets and predicting predatory publications.<sup>8</sup>

Contrasting Heintzelman and Nocetti's operational critique, Billings and Hardin<sup>9</sup> explored the nuances of journal scope and how these impact acceptance rates. These scholars found that manuscript misalignment with a journal's aims is one of the most common reasons for rejection, even for well-written manuscript that stand to contribute valuable knowledge. The study also reported that authors frequently misjudge a journal's scope, which leads to unnecessary rejections. Furthermore, these scholars demonstrated that peer review is highly subjective, as reviewers may have divergent opinions on what constitutes a "major revision." Due to such inconsistencies, and if not handled transparently and systematically, the peer review process can contribute to authors' frustration, instead of ensuring manuscript quality, especially when feedback is conflicting.

Mills et al.,<sup>10</sup> in their study titled "Who Counts? Ghanaian Academic Publishing and Global Science" added another layer to this conversation by focusing on the prestige of journals. These scholars' findings emphasized that high-impact journals serve as gatekeepers to academic promotion, tenure, and job security, making them attractive targets for researchers. Publishing in such journals is often seen as a key criterion for career advancement, not just in Ghana, but across the academic world. However, this study also raised concerns about equity in publishing. In this regard, it is argued that researchers from developing countries, such as Tanzania, may struggle to publish in high-impact journals due to the publication fees that need to be paid and the perceived lower quality of research from less-resourced institutions. This raises critical questions about the fairness of the academic publishing system and whether it privileges researchers from wealthier institutions. This study's findings imply that while publishing in high-impact journals is advantageous, not everyone can rip the benefits of doing so, thereby perpetuating inequality in the global academic community.

The issue of journal impact factor, and its influence on submission decisions, has been widely debated in literature. For example, Moradzadeh, Sedghi, and Panahi<sup>11</sup> noted that despite the criticism surrounding it, journal impact factor (JIF) remains a dominant metric for assessing journal quality. These scholars argue that despite being criticized for not accurately reflecting the quality of individual articles, this factor plays a significant role in authors' decisions about where to submit their manuscripts. Nonetheless, the use of JIF as a measure of journal quality creates pressure among researchers, compelling them to prioritize publishing in high-impact journals at the expense of disseminating research in more

specialized and niche outlets that are more appropriate for their work. This reflects the tension that exists between prestige and relevance, in which authors must decide whether they are more concerned with reaching the right audience or securing publication in a journal that will boost their careers.

Dunleavy's<sup>12</sup> study on the peer review process in social work disciplines raised further concerns about the effectiveness of peer review in ensuring the dissemination of high-quality knowledge. The scholar critiqued the current peer review system as being insufficiently rigorous in some cases, and excessively harsh in others. He argues that the system, although central to maintaining academic standards, often operates without transparency, leaving authors unsure of how to address reviewers' feedback. This critique aligns with Billings and Hardin's<sup>13</sup> findings regarding the subjectivity of peer reviews. However, Dunleavy focused more on the inconsistencies within peer review panels, proposing that improvements in transparency and consistency could make the process more supportive for authors, particularly those early in their careers. For Tanzanian scholars, navigating such an opaque system may add additional barriers to publication, especially for those unfamiliar with the expectations of international journals.

Pre-publication peer review was further discussed by Besançon et al.<sup>14</sup> These scholars agree with other researchers that the system remains a cornerstone of scholarly communication and argue that despite the criticism it receives, peer review is essential for maintaining the integrity and quality of scientific research. However, the scholars have also pointed out that the process can be slow and opaque, leading to delays in publication and frustrations for authors. This delay is particularly problematic for early-career researchers or those in rapidly evolving fields, where the timeliness of publication can significantly impact the relevance of their work. For this reason, Besançon et al. have proposed that journals should adopt more transparent and efficient peer review processes. This can be partly done by including clearer guidelines for reviewers and ensuring that more standardized feedback is provided to authors.

In contrast, a comparative study by Martin<sup>15</sup> focused on the ethical operations of journals, particularly the importance of having sound editorial practices. Martin has highlighted that journals with strong ethical reputations tend to attract more high-quality submissions, as authors trust the integrity of the editorial process. The scholar has also argued that journals with a history of ethical management, transparent peer review processes, and a well-respected editorial board are more likely to be favored by authors. This suggests that for Tanzanian lecturers, understanding the reputation of a journal – beyond its impact factor – should be a key consideration when deciding where to submit their work.

Another important factor highlighted by several studies is the role of open access in scholarly communication. On this, Boufarss and Harviainen<sup>16</sup> have pointed out that open access journals, which are often less prestigious but more accessible, are becoming increasingly attractive to scholars who want their work to reach a broader audience. These authors have noted that open access can democratize knowledge by making research available to individuals who cannot afford traditional journals subscription fees. For researchers in Tanzania, where institutional resources for journal subscriptions may be limited, open access can provide a more equitable platform for disseminating research. However, Boufarss and Harviainen also warned that open access often comes with high publishing fees, which may deter authors from submitting their work to them, creating yet another barrier for scholars from developing countries.

Overall, despite the richness of these studies, few have explored the specific considerations that Tanzanian academics members make when deciding where to submit their manuscripts. For this reason, this study has been carried as an attempt to fill this gap by examining the perspectives of Tanzanian scholars on the submission, processing, and publication factors surrounding the academic publishing process. While much of the global literature points to issues like journal impact factor, peer review transparency, and the ethics of editorial practices, the unique challenges that are faced by Tanzanian academics – such as access to resources and the costs of publication – remain underexplored.

## Methodology

This study utilised a quantitative research approach to gather numerical data from participants through closed-ended questions. The research design adopted is an explanatory survey, which aligns with the quantitative approach because it focuses on quantifiable data collection and analysis.<sup>17</sup> An explanatory survey design allows researchers to identify the relationships that exist between variables and the patterns or trends within a specific population. This design involves the systematic gathering of numerical data from a sample population and the use of statistical methods to analyse them. The goal of doing so is to provide a detailed and data-driven understanding of the phenomena under study.

According to Creswell and Creswell<sup>18</sup>, quantitative research uses structured tools to produce statistically analyzable data. In this study, the use of an explanatory survey was particularly helpful in understanding librarians' support for publishing by allowing the researcher to measure specific variables such as the frequency of support activities, the types of publishing assistance offered, and the factors influencing these practices. By using closed-ended questions, the study captured consistent responses that could be compared across different groups of librarians, revealing clear patterns and correlations. This approach enabled the researcher to derive meaningful insights into the extent and nature of librarians' involvement in supporting academic publishing, thus grounding the findings in measurable evidence that can inform institutional strategies and policymaking.

## Participants

In this study, participants include all teaching staff members from two higher learning institutions; the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) and the Institute of Finance Management (IFM). These persons, who are collectively referred to in this article as "lecturers," hold various academic positions, ranging from tutorial assistant, assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, and professor. It is important to emphasize that the reason behind targeting these is their active engagement in research and publication as part of their employment in academia. As a result, the group comprises a broad set of experts with varying degrees of experience and expertise in their respective disciplines. This study specifically explored the factors influencing manuscript submission decisions among lecturers in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, aiming to understand what drives or hinders their publishing practices. Participation was entirely voluntary, and before responding to the online questionnaire, all potential participants were provided with an introductory statement detailing the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, the anonymity of their responses, and assurance of confidentiality. Consent was indicated by their decision to complete and submit the form.

## Sample size and sampling procedure

The study utilised both purposive and convenience sampling procedures to select lecturers who participated in the research.

### *Purposive sampling*

This procedure was employed to select participants based on specific criteria such as their relevance to the research topic, availability, and proximity to the research site.<sup>18</sup> Out of the two official WhatsApp groups of lecturers from higher learning institutions, we identified members who possessed relevant knowledge and met our research criteria. Initially, the researchers identified 97 potential participants based on the purposive criteria. This ensured that all selected participants had relevant expertise and were suitable for the study. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researchers to intentionally target lecturers who had experience or involvement with academic publishing, ensuring that the data collected would be directly relevant to the investigation of librarians' support for publishing.

### **Convenience sampling**

In addition to purposive sampling, convenience sampling was used to include respondents who were readily available and willing to participate in the study. Specifically, this involved selecting members who were active in the WhatsApp groups and expressed willingness to respond to the survey. From these 97 potential participants, those who were active in the WhatsApp groups and willing to participate were included in the final sample. This resulted in a total of 50 study participants, with 37 from MNMA and 13 from the IFM. Convenience sampling was particularly useful in this study due to the online setting, which allowed quick access to participants who were both available and responsive in real time. This ensured timely data collection while also maintaining engagement with participants already familiar with digital communication platforms. By employing both purposive and convenience sampling techniques, the study ensured a diverse representation of lecturers while also considering practical factors such as accessibility and willingness to participate. This combined approach allowed for the inclusion of participants who met the research criteria while maximising response rates and ensuring feasibility.<sup>19</sup> Although this sampling does not allow for statistical generalisation to all higher education institutions in Tanzania, the findings provide important insights from a representative subset of lecturers with publishing experience, which may offer transferable lessons to similar academic contexts.

### **Ethical approval**

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research and Publications Directorate of the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, which reviewed and approved the research protocol, including procedures for participant recruitment, informed consent, and data protection.

### **Data collection tools, analysis, and presentation**

To align with the objectives of the study, primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire design was informed by a comprehensive review of existing literature on lecturers' competencies in the manuscript submission process, ensuring content validity and alignment with established scholarly discourse. Key references that guided the formulation of questions included seminal and contemporary works by Billings and Hardin,<sup>20</sup> Björk and Solomon,<sup>21</sup> Edetanlen and Azodo,<sup>22</sup> Fiona,<sup>23</sup> Garg and Kaur,<sup>24</sup> and Lee, Lee, and Kim.<sup>25</sup> These works informed the selection of question themes, including factors to consider when submitting manuscripts to journals for publication. The survey focused on closed-ended questions tailored to address the study's research questions. Specifically, the section on journal reputation included aspects such as impact factor, indexing databases, publisher credibility, and peer-review processes – factors identified in previous scholarly works as critical to evaluating journal quality. The questionnaire link was shared via the official WhatsApp groups of lecturers at MNMA and the IFM. Rather than pre-selecting individuals, the survey was open to all lecturers within these groups, allowing for voluntary participation. This approach ensured a broad representation of lecturers from the two institutions, resembling a census rather than a strict sampling method. To maximize participation, the Google Forms link remained active for two weeks, giving respondents ample time to complete the survey. Data were analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20. This methodological approach enabled the collection of practical, experience-based insights from Tanzanian lecturers engaged in publication, ensuring alignment with the research problem while grounding findings in prior empirical evidence.

## Results and discussions

### Response rate

Aiming to include 97 lecturers from MNMA and the IFM, this study secured responses from 50 participants, with 37 from MNMA and 17 from IFM, resulting in a response rate of 51.55%. While this level of engagement indicates considerable participation from the target group, it is important to note that the findings may not fully reflect the views of those who did not participate. Although the data provides valuable insights, the possibility of response bias remains, as participants may have had distinct experiences or opinions compared to non-respondents. Consequently, the absence of perspectives from non-participants could mean that certain viewpoints, particularly those diverging from the majority, are underrepresented, thereby potentially limiting the generalizability of the study's findings.

### Factors influencing decisions when submitting an article to a journal

The study participants were asked to state the most crucial consideration when submitting a manuscript to a journal for review and publication consideration. The findings from the analysis of the collected data are presented in [Table 1](#).

The findings from [Table 1](#) highlight the multifaceted considerations that lecturers make when selecting journals for manuscript submission. These findings reveal both likeness and divergence in the considerations that lecturers have mentioned. Some of the highly cited considerations are discussed in the subsections that follow:

#### Journal reputation

A significant portion (74%) of respondents, as shown in [Table 1](#), indicated that the journal's reputation is a primary consideration for submitting articles for publication. This finding aligns with assertions by Moore<sup>26</sup> and Tazegul et al.<sup>27</sup> about the pivotal role journal reputation plays in authors' decision-making processes before manuscript submission. However, Edetanlen and Azodo<sup>28</sup> noted that choosing a reputable journal often presents challenges and can lead to disagreements among researchers regarding what constitutes a reputable journal. This highlights the complexity and subjective nature of evaluating journal reputation in the context of academic publishing.

#### Speed of publication

The speed of publication post-acceptance is another significant factor for authors. This is according to the 68% of respondents that mentioned it (see [Table 1](#)). This aligns this study with those by Awojobi<sup>29</sup> and Mills et al.,<sup>30</sup> which revealed that authors value swift publication timelines alongside considerations like article processing charges. James<sup>31</sup> underscores that timely dissemination of research

**Table 1.** Factors influencing manuscript submissions (n = 50).

Considerations	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Journal reputation	37	74.0
Speed of Publication	34	68.0
The intended audience/readers of the journal	27	54.0
Peer-review process	22	44.0
Availability of journals' metrics	21	42.0
Impact factor of the journal	19	38.0
Availability of updates on manuscripts progress	14	28.0
Options on open-access publishing	13	26.0
Composition of Editorial board	13	26.0
Proper marketing of the journal	10	20.0
Journal services offered	7	14.0
Physical quality of the journal	5	10.0
Availability of the journal's repository	0	0.0

findings is crucial for advancing knowledge and maintaining relevance, suggesting that journals must streamline their publication processes to meet author expectations and stay competitive in the academic publishing landscape.

### ***Intended audience/readers of the journal***

The intended audience of a journal is another critical factor in authors' decisions, with 54% of respondents in [Table 1](#) identifying it as a key consideration. Authors prioritize journals whose readership aligns with their research to ensure their findings reach those who can engage with and benefit from them. Moore [3] emphasizes that selecting a journal with a relevant audience enhances the potential impact and visibility of research. Similarly, Fiona<sup>32</sup> and Krish<sup>33</sup> highlight that targeting an appropriate audience fosters better dissemination, collaboration, and real-world application of research findings. By considering the intended readership, authors maximize the relevance and influence of their work, ensuring that it contributes meaningfully to their fields.

### ***Peer review process***

The peer review process is also highlighted as an important factor, with 44% of respondents in [Table 1](#) stating that the type of peer review (single or double-blind) employed is crucial. Xu et al.<sup>34</sup> reinforce this view by noting that many authors prioritize the integrity and rigor of the peer-review process when deciding on article submission to journals. The importance of a rigorous peer review is further supported by Marco et al.,<sup>35</sup> who indicates that authors view high standards of review as essential for ensuring the quality and credibility of published research.

### ***Availability of journals' metrics***

The availability of journal metrics, cited as important by 42% of respondents in [Table 1](#), also plays a crucial role in shaping authors' perceptions of a journal's relevance and quality. Metrics, such as citation counts, impact factors, and download statistics, provide tangible indicators of a journal's influence and readership, which authors use to assess its suitability for their work.<sup>36</sup> These metrics not only enhance the credibility of a journal, but also influence authors' decisions by demonstrating its ability to amplify the visibility and impact of their research.

### ***Impact factor***

The impact factor of journals is the other factor recognized as an important consideration during article submission to journals. In [Table 1](#), it is indicated that approximately 38% of authors prioritize this metric. This confirms the findings of studies by Zhou et al.<sup>37</sup> and Severin et al.,<sup>38</sup> which have revealed that a journal's impact factor influences submission rates and reflects its prestige within its research community. The implication of this trend is that authors may prioritize submitting their work to journals with higher impact factors, potentially impacting the diversity of published research and the representation of emerging fields in academic literature.

### ***Availability of updates on manuscript progress***

Fourteen respondents, equivalent to 28%, reported that they tend to look for the availability of updates on manuscript progress when making choices of the journals to which they can submit their manuscripts for publication considerations. This finding is supported by the work of Lee et al.,<sup>39</sup> who emphasize that timely updates on manuscript status enhance authors' satisfaction and engagement with the submission process. Additionally, Wager et al.<sup>40</sup> note that clear communication regarding manuscript progress is crucial for authors, as it affects their perception of the journal's efficiency and professionalism.

### ***Open-access publishing option***

Open access is also acknowledged as an important consideration, with approximately 26% of participants in [Table 1](#) citing it as a key factor. Likewise, Bankier and Perciali<sup>41</sup> suggest that authors are increasingly prioritizing open-access options due to the desire to disseminate research findings widely and ensure accessibility. This growing preference of open-access publishing reflects a shift in academic culture, emphasizing the importance of making research accessible to a broader audience. The implication of this trend is that journals that have adopted open-access models may experience increased submissions, especially from authors seeking broader visibility and impact for their work.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Composition of editorial board***

Furthermore, a total of 13 participants, constituting 26%, indicated that the configuration of the editorial board is paramount as it signifies the proficiency, professionalism, and ethical standards of the journal itself. A carefully assembled editorial board possesses the potential to bolster a journal's credibility and engender high-caliber submissions. This observation corresponds with the research conducted by Besancenot, Huynh, and Faria,<sup>43</sup> as well as that by Dengsheng et al.,<sup>44</sup> which assert that the diversity and expertise of editorial boards considerably affect the perceived quality and influence of academic journals. According to the findings of Besancenot, Huynh, and Faria,<sup>45</sup> these boards assume a crucial function in the shaping of the benchmarks and trajectory of a journal. Similarly, Dengsheng et al.<sup>46</sup> underscore that varied and adept editorial boards can enhance a journal's reputation within the academic sphere.

### ***Other considerations***

This study identifies several other factors that influence the manuscript writing and submission decisions of lecturers. However, these were cited by fewer respondents. Factors such as proper marketing of the journal, the range of services offered by the journal, the physical quality of the journal, and the availability of its repository appear to be less strong factors. In particular, proper marketing plays the role of ensuring that authors are aware of a journal's existence and its scope, and in so doing, it potentially boosts submission rates.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the range of services that are provided by a journal, such as timely peer reviews and strong editorial support, can enhance authors' experiences and influence their submission decisions.<sup>48</sup> Although less cited, the physical quality of a journal encompassing its design, layout, and usability can shape the perceptions of its professionalism and reader engagement. Furthermore, the availability of a repository for published works, though less mentioned, promotes academic visibility and accessibility, contributing to broader citation potential.<sup>49</sup> These factors, though appearing to be less prominent, highlight nuanced elements that may influence an author's choice of a journal, underscoring the multifaceted nature of the manuscript submission decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that the lecturers of the surveyed institutions mostly consider two factors when deciding the journal to submit their manuscripts to. These are: the journal's reputation and the speed with which the work is published after acceptance. These factors emphasize the significance of prestige and efficiency to the publication decisions of academics. Additionally, the researchers conclude that the reputation of a journal, how long its review process takes, its intended audience, its peer review process, its provision of metrics, and how long it takes for a manuscript to be published are the highly considered factors when deciding where to submit a manuscript for review and publication considerations.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made:

- Strengthening Training on Journal Reputation and Review Quality: Academic institutions should prioritise educating lecturers on assessing journal reputation, peer-review rigour, and publication transparency. Given that journal reputation was the most influential factor in submission decisions, tailored training by research offices and librarians would help lecturers make informed choices that reflect academic standards.
- Creating Platforms for Information on Review and Publication Timelines: Since the speed of peer review and publication emerged as a key determinant, institutions should consider creating accessible databases or platforms where lecturers can share and access average timelines for various journals. This peer-based insight could support more realistic planning and expectations in scholarly publishing.
- Enhancing Research Support Services for Journal Selection: Universities should provide dedicated support for manuscript submission guidance. Librarians and research coordinators can offer one-on-one consultations to help lecturers evaluate factors such as audience relevance, availability of metrics, and peer-review processes elements identified as influential in this study

### Limitation of the study

This research was conducted at two higher learning institutions (HLIs) in Tanzania, which might limit the general applicability of the findings to other universities and HLIs in the country. While the study offers valuable insights into the selected institutions, differences in institutional policies, technological infrastructure, and faculty experiences at other HLIs may result in varying outcomes. Moreover, the sample size consisted of 50 lecturers, which, although providing useful perspectives, may not fully represent the diverse academic community in Tanzania. The use of purposive and convenience sampling, along with the narrow scope of participating institutions, further limits the extent to which these findings can be broadly generalised. Although efforts were made to include lecturers with relevant experience in research and publishing, the sample may not capture the full range of practices and perceptions across the country's academic sector. Future research could expand the sample size and include a wider range of disciplines to improve the generalizability of the findings. Further studies encompassing multiple disciplines would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter across the broader academic landscape.

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