Review on the Status of Theory and Research of Social Media Studies in Malaysia: A Conceptual Paper

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ABSTRACT: In the recent years, the literature indicated that adoption and consequences of using social media on the users and society has become a popular topic among the communication scholars. However, past studies also show that prior efforts in discussing on the stature and scholarship of social media research in Malaysia is scarce. Thus, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to review on the theoretical patterns and research trends of social media related studies on Malaysian users. In particular, the method used is based on literature reviews in chronological order concerning new media, social media and research trends analyses from journal articles, theses proceedings and conferences, book and more. A framework of analysis was generated to identify the frequency and occurrences in theoretical application, research topic areas, methodological approaches, types of contents, social media medium of interest and research developmental phases of social media studies. The study ends with summaries and recommendations to utilise comprehensive content analyses of communication and media journals in Malaysia to trace the theoretical trends and research patterns pertaining to social media research.

Keywords: communication, content analysis, literature review, Malaysian users, research trends, social media

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, with the advancement of social media, people are actively embracing the new communication technology, bringing together immense usage globally. Social media users are able to access information, chat among families or friends, and discuss their views as well as share data such as audios, pictures and videos with others online (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) categorised social media as collaborative projects (i.e. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogging (i.e. Blogspot, Twitter), content communities (i.e. Flickr, YouTube), social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, MySpace), virtual game worlds (i.e. Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (i.e. SecondLife).

In the digital era today, media and communication are increasingly mediated by social media and is touted as a digital revolution across the world. Pick (2013) assert that there are about 1 billion users connecting in Facebook, 200 million are tweeting on Twitter, 800 million are on YouTube and 200 million on LinkedIn. In Malaysia, the social media diffusion and consumption are thriving with 20 million Internet users, representing 67% of the country's population (Internet World Stats, 2014). Moreover, Malaysia is ranked at eighth place (62%) in September 2016 for having active accounts on the top social network in the world (We Are Social, 2016). Specifically, Facebook is the leading social media for 84.2% Malaysian users, followed by Twitter with 14.3% users, LinkedIn at 2.4%, Google+ (2.6%) and other lesser known social networking sites (1.1%) (MCMC, 2013). Consequently, the statistics above implicated that social media adoption has been escalating at a remarkable place whether internationally or locally.

Social media has also transformed the academic landscape with more and more scholars interested in studying how traditional mass media has been revolutionised to interactive digital communication (Baran and Davis, 2012; Khang et al., 2012). This implies that the impact of social media can be to some extent different from the traditional media such as print media, radio and television. According to Wei (2008), media users are no longer passive audiences that depend on the media to get information, but are now active media users where they are more engaged with the media. Today, social media users are able to communicate and consume media content based own their own decisions in interpreting and receiving those messages (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001). They are perceived to have the power to receive or discard any media messages. In other words, social media users can do almost anything online today as they live in a richer media environment with easy access via their personal computers and smart phones. Through the shifting of communication patterns and habits of the

media users from passive to active social media users, studies related to social media are escalating to understand on the usage of this new media, network relationships and the effect it has on the users and society.

In addition, Malaysian scholars are also showing growing interest on the issues and phenomenon related to the new communication technology (Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman, 2015). Academic research on social media in the nation explored on the adoption among youth, privacy issues, identity and reputation, usage and gratifications, effects of social media on its users and society, social media in social and political aspect and more (Ishak et al., 2012; Mun et al., 2011; Abdulahi et al., 2014; Azizuddin et al., 2013; Hamid et al., 2013; Mustafa et al., 2013; Wok et al., 2012; Muniandy and Muniandy, 2013). Although there is plethora of studies concentrating on social media, it can be inferred that current research trends related to social media studies on Malaysian users are inadequate, when we compare with the research trends analyses from the Western scholars. Thus, continuing with the research trends inquiry, the aim of this study is to discuss on the state of social media research in Malaysia by reviewing literature in chronological order concerning social media adoption, impact and research trends from journal articles, theses proceedings and conferences, books and more. Kamhawi and Weaver (2003) stated that by assessing past studies on a certain field, researchers are able to identify larger patterns and trends in mass communication research. Additionally, trends analyses research can help researchers in identifying strength and weaknesses as well as of large quantity and insufficiency in research (Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003). The rationale of this study is to see the progressions and directions of social media in the country that may lead to further research in social media advancement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Progression of Mass Communication Research

Past studies illustrates that there are several studies that have traced on the research trends of mass media use, media effects and theoretical application in the Western countries. These studies have comprehensively reviewed the development of mass communication research scholarship in the past (Bryant and Miron, 2004; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Potter and Riddle, 2007; Bryant and Cummins, 2007). In particular, most of these studies employed quantitative content analysis approach by determining patterns in general publication, theoretical application and methodological approach. The studies primarily focused on the frequency of theoretical application, the topical and methodological approaches, medium and type of content employed in mass communication studies (Bryant and Miron, 2004; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Potter and Riddle, 2007; Bryant and Cummins, 2007).

In Malaysia, scholars have also shed light on the evolution of mass communication research in the country. In 1990, Hassan and Salleh examined the communication research needs and issues in the country, highlighting on the most commonly researched topics, types of media and methodological approach. These scholars employed a content analysis on undergraduate theses and staff's research in two universities, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia from 1980 until 1989. In 2005, Merican looked into the identity of communication in Malaysia. Several years later, Idid (2014) traced the development of communication studies from 1971 until 2014. The study concentrated on academic activities in universities that offer communication programmes as well as on academic content. Moreover, Idid (2014) also examined the conferences of Seminar Penyelidikan 1991, MENTION 2011 and MENTION 2013 to see the overall trends of research in communication. Specifically, Idid (2014) focused on the most commonly studied area of research, methodological preference and theoretical application. In this trends analysis, Idid (2014) mentioned that it is now imperative to probe deeper into the adoption of social media in Malaysia because communication process in the nation has evolved. He stated that, "the concepts of audience, effects of the media, space of communication and time have been changed" (Idid, 2014, p. 14). For this reason, the status of social media related studies should be re-evaluated through the existing literature.

Social Media Related Research Patterns

Acknowledging the popularity of new communication technologies such as the Internet, new media and social media, scholars are increasingly reviewing the scholarship and direction of communication research related to the subject matter. Prior studies show that there are diversified publication trends analyses on the Internet, new media, social media and social networking sites that has been done in the West (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006; Tomasello et al., 2010; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014). These scholars also utilised quantitative content analyses in their research. Several analyses were conducted concentrating on research trends of new media in mass communication (Tomasello et al., 2010); theoretical and methodological trends of communication research on the Internet (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006); social media research patterns (Khang et al., 2012) and overview of current development status of social networking sites research in mass communication (Zhang and Leung, 2014). Interestingly, Kim and Weaver (2002) revealed that their analysis on Internet-related research in communication journals from 1996 until 2000 indicated that studies on the matter are augmenting. Their study looked into the patterns of research focus,

methodologies and application of theories. Not only that, Kim and Weaver (2002) also adopted the Wimmer and Dominick's (2000) four phases of communication development model in framing the Internet studies. Findings illustrate that during that time, Internet research involved all four phases of mass media research including on the issues of the Internet itself (Phase 1), uses and users of the Internet (Phase 2), effects of the Internet (Phase 3) and how the Internet can be improved (Phase 4).

Over the years, another study also looked into the trends of Internet-related studies between the years 1994 and 2003 (Cho and Khang, 2006). In this study, their focus was not only on the communication disciplines, but also marketing and advertising fields. Cho and Khang (2006) systematically assessed the authorial, topical, theoretical and methodological approaches of the Internet studies. The results of the study implicated that there is a significant increase of Internet research, dispersion of individual authors and institutional contributors. Furthermore, Cho and Khang (2006) also mentioned that future endeavours should emphasise more on theoretical application and methodological rigors. The findings also stated that Internet studies during the timeframe have not reached the last phase of Wimmer and Dominick's (2002) mass media research development. Thus, the scholars suggest for more detailed research on how to improve the Internet in the future.

In going along with the widespread diffusion of social media, Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) investigated on the research patterns and trends discerning social media related research. Explicitly, the study assessed social media research in advertising, communication, marketing and public relation fields from the years 1997 to 2010. These scholars reported that social media studies are rising in the West throughout the years with a total of 436 articles (5.5%) from 7,987 articles in 17 journals. Specifically, the findings revealed that Journal of Computer-Mediate Communication addressed the most papers on social media at 43.6%, followed by New Media & Society (18.3%). Employing variables from Cho and Khang's (2006) study, Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) coded their study based on social media type, research topics, theoretical framework, research method and data collection or sampling methods. Additionally, this study also determined the research developmental stage that social media research are in by utilising Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) phases of media research. Results emphasised that social media research have gone through all of the four phases of mass media research development. Nonetheless, the final phase on the improvement of social media research is still inadequate during the time of analysis. Other than that, Zhang and Leung (2014) have conducted an examination of research pertaining to a specific type of social media, namely social networking service (SNS). The analysis was executed on communication journals from the years 2006 until 2011. This research had identified the objects of study, methodological preferences as well as thematic patterns or common topics of interest regarding SNS.

In growing along with the trend of the Western scholars as well as in understanding better on social media, Malaysian scholars have also investigated on the research patterns and issues on social media such as microblogging (i.e. Twitter), collaborative projects (i.e. wikis) and content communities (i.e. YouTube) (Alias et al., 2013; Alias et al., 2013). These studies focused on research trends such as topics, issues category, sampling, research method and data analysis. However, these research trends analyses lacks on understanding the theoretical aspects of social media studies in Malaysia. Moreover, these studies also did not look into the social media research development stages to see the progression of the social media advancement in the country.

Scholars have argued that there is a need to understand the theoretical conversations of social media research in Malaysia (Khang et al., 2012; Scolari, 2009; Kim and Weaver, 2002). The expansion of social media has challenged the traditional mass media, ushering a situation where some of the existing theories, theoretical framework or models to understand the mass media might not be suitable to integrate with the new media (Scolari, 2009). Thus, we need to assess on the theoretical trends of social media research. Furthermore, existing literature on research trends analyses also portray that there is a gap in literature on examining the developmental stage of social media research in Malaysia (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Cho & Khang, 2006; Khang et al., 2012).

Findings of the studies above exemplify that research trends analyses focused on the research topics covered, methodologies approaches employed, theoretical foundations applied, research development stages of communication, social media type, data sampling methods and more. The assessment of patterns of new communication technologies research suggest useful guidelines or analytical framework for scholars to conduct research trends analyses on social media research. Therefore, based on the results of the literature review, a framework of analysis is formed. To be specific, the analytical framework includes the following variables: theoretical application, methodological preferences, medium, type of content, topical areas and developmental stages of social media research (Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Kim and Weaver, 2002; Tomasello et al., 2010; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014).

III. FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Past trend studies of social media research and mass communication studies have focused primary on variables such as theoretical, methodological, topical, medium, type of content and research developmental status of the field (Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Kim and Weaver, 2002; Tomasello et al., 2010; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014). Through this framework of analysis (Figure 1), social media research trends in Malaysia can be compared with the examinations of the Western scholars. In the next sections, the following literature is reviewed in explaining on the framework of analysis.



Figure1. Framework of Analysis

Theoretical Application

Theoretical framework can be described as a guide in research that helps to direct attention to certain systems of explanation that needed testing (Keyton, 2006). Within the development of mass communication research, theoretical aspects of studies have become a concern for scholars. Literature review portray that the vast majority of mass communication research failed or lack in theoretical usage or construction. A mere 27% to 39% of articles within the communication journals entails theoretical applications (Bryant and Miron, 2004; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003). In Kamhawi and Weaver's (2003) study on mass communication research trends, for example, from the 889 articles examined over the years of 1980 to 1999, only 30.5% of the articles mentioned a theory, and an additional 9% imply a theory.

A year later, Bryant and Miron (2004) found that after examining more than 1,806 articles, only 32% of the articles include some form of theory in their communication studies. Furthermore, Bryant and Miron (2004) also examined on how the theories were used within the literature and the frequency of their usage. Findings reveal that 48.03% of the articles refer to a theory; 26.13% applied theory as theoretical framework for the study, 7.9% make comparison of theories, and 4.31% critique theories. Aside from that, 3.16% propose a theory, 2.58% tested a new theory, 2.01% integrate theories and 1.87% expanded a theory.

Moreover, theoretical application was also considered rare in new media or social media research scholarship (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006; Wei, 2009; Khang et al., 2012). Kim and Weaver (2002) have conducted a theoretical review of communication research about the Internet from the year 1996 until 2000. According to their findings, test of theory was low where only 96 articles out of 561 studies applied a certain communication theory. Khang, Ki and Ye's (2012) investigated on the research patterns and trends of social media research between the years 1997 and 2010. According to these scholars, findings exhibit that 40% of the articles do present theories or theoretical framework in their studies. Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) remarked that scholars in social media studies are still lacking in theory building or development as well as application of theories that may help to understand the social media phenomena.

In Malaysia, scholars are also facing similar situations on the theoretical contribution in the mass communication field. Hassan and Salleh (1990) as well as Idid (2014) also agreed that Malaysian scholars are perceived to be lacking on adopting and constructing theories in their research. In addition, with the inadequate trends analyses on the theoretical aspects of social media research, there is a need to explore further to understand on the application of theories and how they are used in social media studies on Malaysian users. Consequently, future study should examine on the theoretical application of social media studies in the country. Theoretical aspects comprise on understanding which theory, theoretical framework, concept or model that is commonly used in social media research. Among the values for this variable will include theories such as uses and gratifications, agenda-setting, framing, priming, diffusion of innovation, social information processing, media system dependency and more.

Not only that, researchers also suggest that future studies should inquire further on how the theory, theoretical framework, concept or model is used in the study. Adopting from Bryant and Miron (2004), the study should look into the usage of theory, whether the study merely referenced the theory, applied theory as theoretical framework, make comparison of more than one theory, critique theory, propose new theory, tested new theory, integrate more than one theory or expand a theory.

Methodological Preference

Previous studies reveal that scholars have always appraise on research methods most frequently used in mass communication research (Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Bryant and Cummins, 2007; Li and Tang, 2012; Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006; Wei, 2009; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014). According to Keyton (2006), quantitative methods rely on numerical findings and measurements to understand a communication phenomenon such as quantity, frequencies, degrees, values and more. Qualitative methods are research that studies a communication phenomenon based on its natural settings in understanding the meaning that people have constructed (Merriam, 2009). If the social media related research has utilised both the quantitative methodologies, then the study would be categorised as the mixed methods. A few of the studies have also utilised critical and conceptual or review methodologies.

Existing literature illustrate that dominant trends in methodology in mass communication discipline is the quantitative research approach (Schramm, 1957; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003). Bryant and Cummins (2007) also indicated that there are low numbers of scholarly publications employing the qualitative methods in the West. In Malaysia, Hassan and Salleh (1990) mentioned that early years of mass communication research in the country mostly adopts the quantitative research approach. The most common research methods were survey, content analysis, case studies and more. By 2011 and 2013, Malaysian scholars were still engrossed on employing survey and content analysis, but also embraced qualitative research approach in their research (Idid, 2014). In new media research publication assessment, the qualitative research approach were dominantly utilised in communication research (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006; Wei, 2009). On the other hand, Zhang and Leung (2014) state the opposite. According to these scholars, a review of social networking sites research in communication journals emphasised that scholars have the tendency to employ the quantitative approach (75%), followed by qualitative (11.9%), mixed methods (7.1%), critical (1.2%) and conceptual or review (4.8%). Similar with Zhang and Leung's (2014) study, Khang, Ki and Ye's (2012) study on social media research trends also assert that quantitative methods (58.5%) were more dominant, followed by critical (19.7%), qualitative (15.6%) and mixed methods at 6.2%.

Hence, in this current study, we adopt the measures used in Khang, Han, Shin, Jung and Kim's (2015) study. Future social media research trend study should identify trends of methodological preferences through the following variables: research method (i.e. content analysis, experiment, survey, in-depth interview, focus group, ethnography, participation observation, case study and more), research approach (i.e. quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods), research orientation (i.e. empirical or non-empirical), sampling method (i.e. probability or non-probability), type of data collection (i.e. offline or online) and data analysis approach (i.e. content analysis, critical analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, statistical analysis and more).

Type of Social Media

Existing literature also shows that research activity follows the progression of the media in the mass communication field (Schramm, 1957; Hassan and Salleh, 1990; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Potter and Riddle, 2007). Previous studies refer medium as all media such as print media, television, radio, recordings, films and Internet (Li and Tang, 2012).

For better understanding on the trends of social media studies, the most commonly researched social media type should also be examined. In Khang, Ki and Ye (2012), social media types were based on the definition of social media, such as: computer-mediated group communication, online community/virtual group (34.2%), blogs (16.3%), social network sites (11.7%), forum or discussion of boards (11.7%), electronic word of mouth (7.3%) and instant messaging (7.1%). Conversely, taking into account on understanding the social media segments proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) such as (1) collaborative project (i.e. Wikis), (2) blogs and microblogging (i.e. Wordpress, Blogspot or Twitter), (3) content communities (i.e. YouTube, Pinterest or Flickr), (4) social networking sites (i.e. Facebook or MySpace), (5) virtual social worlds (i.e. SecondLife) and (6) virtual game worlds (i.e. Warcraft). The use of this categorisation from Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is because the definition is easier for researchers to comprehend and understand to identify the social media type used in the studies conducted on Malaysian users.

Type of Content

Existing studies also assessed on the type of content areas (Potter and Riddle, 2007; Li and Tang, 2012) studied on in mass communication research. Prior studies focus on content types such as news or editorial, advertising and entertainment. To investigate the research trends of social media studies in Malaysia, the type of contents used should also be identified, including news or information, advertising or public relations and entertainment.

Topic of Interest

Topical status of research has garnered scholarly attention in the Western countries as well as in Malaysia (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014; Idid, 2014). Prior literature on new media research indicated that uses and perceptions of the Internet was the most commonly studied topic on new media (Cho and Khang, 2006). On the other hand, Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) identified top five topics in published social media related research from 1997 to 2010. The topics include social media usage, perception, attitude towards social media (67.7%); social media as a mass or personal communication tool (22.2%); social or political issues regarding social media (17.9%); social media as marketing tool and social media in comparison with other media. In Zhang and Leung's study (2014), for instance, research topics were identified according to four broad themes outlined by Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 219-222) as well as one new theme, including impression management and friendship performance, network and network structure, bridging online and offline networks, privacy and extended scope in social networking sites research.

Hence, this current study intends to apply a more widespread categorisation of topical areas. Referencing and adopting earlier trend analyses of new media, social media and social networking sites studies (Cho and Khang, 2006; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Khang et al., 2012; Zhang and Leung, 2014), we identified eight (8) classification of research topics. The research topic categories are as follows: (1) social media usage, perception and attitude towards social media – studies that investigates on how and the reason to why people adopt social media or studies on the evaluation of users' perception or attitudes towards the social media; (2) effects of social media on users and society – studies that discovers the impact of social media on users, culture, society and more; (3) social media as either mass or personal communication tools – studies that focus on using social media for daily social interaction; (4) social or political issues regarding social media – studies that look into the changes of the political and social environment via social media as a platform for self-identity or presentation and in building relationships online; (6) threat or privacy issues in social media – studies that emphasise on privacy, potential threats or information disclosure on social media; (7) social media in comparison with other media and (8) regulation or policy issues related to social media.

Research Developmental Stages

Past studies project that scholars also explored on the state of social media, new media or mass media research based on the four developmental stages of Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) mass media research model (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Cho and Khang, 2006; Khang et al., 2012). Based on this model (refer to Figure 2), scholars are able to recommend future researchers on how to improve studies related to social media. In 2002, Kim and Weaver (2002, p. 532) mentioned that their findings project that research on the Internet between the years 1996 until 2000 involves all four stages of the developmental model. But, according to Cho and Khang (2006), the status of Internet research between 1994 and 2003 was at the first three developmental stages of the Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) model. The last stage on how to improve the Internet has yet to be achieved as research trends shows lack on future directions, advanced applications and development of new theories or models (Cho and Khang, 2006).

In Khang, Ki and Ye's (2012) study, these scholars found that social media related research have been through all of the four research phases in mass media. It was reported that social media related research mainly emphasised on uses and users of social media (66.3%), followed by the impact of social media (19.7%), social media itself (12.8%) and improvements to social media (1.1%). It can be concluded that the phase of improving social media research is still rare at the time and needed more attention.



(Source: Wimmer and Dominick, 2011, p. 7) **Figure2**. Research Phases in Mass Media

Henceforth, to identify the research phases of social media research that are undergoing in Malaysia, the current study propose to utilise the Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) research model that consists of four categorisations: (1) on social media itelf – covers issues such as what is social media, how does it work, what technology does it involve, how is it similar or different from traditional media, how much will it cost and what are the functions or services provided; (2) uses and users of social media – this phase looks into how do people use social media, who are the major users, what do the social media provide; (3) effects of social media – covers on how social media affect the users' lives, organisations and society, does social media change the users' perspectives or opinions and are they any harmful effects related to using social media; and (4) improvement of social media – this phase covers on what are the future endeavours of social media research, are there any new concepts or theories related to social media and more.

IV. FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Therefore, through the literature review of research trends on mass communication and social media studies (Hassan and Salleh, 1990; Idid, 2014; DeFleur, 1998; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Bryant and Miron, 2004; Potter and Riddle, 2007; Kim and Weaver, 200; Wei, 2009; Tomasello et al., 2010; Khang et al., 2012; Potter and Riddle, 2007; Li and Tang, 2012), these studies have provided a framework of analysis. Specifically, the framework of analysis comprises of the following useful variables: theoretical framework or model applied in the study (if any), the methodology of research (i.e. research approach, research orientation, etc), the social media medium that the study dealt with (i.e. collaborative project, content community, blog or microblogging, social networking sites, virtual social world, virtual game world), the type of content areas that are typically studied on, the topic of areas studied on as well as the developmental stages that the social media research in Malaysia is at. Consequently, this study's goal is to present a broad overview on the state of social media research in Malaysia as well as to assist other scholars by recommending future directions for studies on social media. Therefore, two research questions for further research are articulated:

RQ1: What are the theories, theoretical frameworks or models are frequently applied and developed and how are these theories being used in social media research on Malaysian users?

RQ2: What is the topical, methodological, medium, type of content and research developmental stages status of social media research on Malaysian users?

Since this paper is conceptual, we plan to answer these questions by conducting a content analysis of published articles in academic communication and media journals in Malaysia. Academic journal articles are selected because it is perceived to be one of the main and accurate sources that can portray the progression and development of social media research in Malaysia. In particular, this study aims to examine (1) theoretical frameworks employed, (2) prominent research topics presented, (3) the methodological approaches applied, (4) types of medium researched on, (5) types of content used, (6) the research development stage of social media research. Henceforth, we hope that this study has open up the opportunity for future insightful articles on the trends of social media research.

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