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Anti-Abortion Discourse in Canada after the Overturning of Roe v. Wade

Carys Thomson

This study investigates the current (November 2023) discourse of anti-abortion activists in Canada to see if the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022 has changed the prevalent themes. A literature review was conducted, and four key themes were inductively derived: Fetal-Personhood Framing, Pro-Women Framing, Religious Downplaying and Legal-Based Arguments. Upon further thematic analysis of six protest sites (July 2022 – November 2023) in Canada, there appeared to be five key themes: Fetal Personhood Framing, Pro-Women Framing, Legal-Based Arguments, Religion-Based Framing and Ascribing Negative Emotions to Women with Abortions. This differed from the findings of Lowe and Page's 2019 study which found the downplaying of religion to be a key theme. The literature stressed finding Pro-Women Framing in discourses but in this analysis, multiple instances of Ascribing Negative Emotions to Women who had Abortions appeared. As was expected, more arguments seemed to be backed by the overturning of Roe v. Wade, as shown by the observation of Legal Based Arguments in protests. This analysis suggests that the reversal of Roe v. Wade has emboldened religious activists by giving them legal backing to no longer downplay religious motivations as their beliefs have been rationalised by law. This can be backed by the lack of Religious Downplaying but relatively frequent Religion-Based Framing and Legal-Based Arguments. Additionally, a minority of signs seemed to be anti-woman which perhaps suggests that the reversal of Roe v. Wade has encouraged activists to vocalise their traditional views more.

Introduction

This study aims to investigate the current discourse among anti-abortion activists in Canada and if the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022 has influenced the language used in anti-abortion protests and if so, how. Understanding how the current pro-life movement in Canada utilises language is important as it allows an unpacking of what motivates the group's mobilisation and what they aim to achieve

by this mobilisation. Expanding the literature on this area could be further used to understand how activist framing might impact those seeking abortion and inform their decisions. There is a distinct lack of research into the discourse of anti-abortion groups in Canada, with the bulk of the literature focusing on the United States. This study wants to see if the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has had larger impacts beyond the US border, considering how influential the US can be in global politics. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was a landmark legislative decision in the US in which the Supreme Court ruled that state control over access to abortion was unconstitutional. This was seen as a keystone moment in feminist history and reproductive rights, but it also motivated proliferators, especially evangelical Christians, to mobilise radically.¹ Many adopted a pro-women frame to attract greater support. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (2022) has been theorised to have devastating repercussions on the reproductive health of Americans and the wider globe, especially for those already suffering from systemic racism.² The literature reviewed suggests that current pro-life discourse centres on themes of fetal-personhood framing, pro-women framing, legal-based arguments and downplaying religion. This research will test whether these themes are present in recent Canadian pro-life discourse. It will also seek to see if any themes have arisen that have not been previously identified in other studies on pro-life discourse. As the research will include small protest settings, like Kelowna (a relatively small city in British Columbia), it will hopefully test the generalisability of the themes established by previous research that focused on major urban areas.

Existing Research

The pro-life movement has maintained relatively strong support throughout the decades, especially in Western countries where there

1 Jennifer Holland, “*Abolishing Abortion: The History of the Pro-Life Movement in America - Organization of American Historians*,” Organization of American Historians (Organization of American Historians, August 23, 2019), <https://www.oah.org/tah/november-3/abolishing-abortion-the-history-of-the-pro-life-movement-in-america/>.

2 Karine Coen-Sanchez et al., “Repercussions of Overturning *Roe v. Wade* for Women across Systems and beyond Borders,” *Reproductive Health* 19, no. 1 (August 24, 2022), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-022-01490-y>.

is still contention between the legislature and citizens on the issue.³ Abortion has been particularly contentious in North America for the last 40 years - scholars point to the increasing polarisation of politics into left and right as a potential influencing factor. Although they share a border and many cultural features, there are vast differences in their approaches to pro-life mobilisation and the resulting legislation. Despite America being the first of the two to implement national abortion protection, Canada has managed to protect it better in the face of opposition.⁴ However, outspoken American conservatives may skew the consensus about abortion in America: Hartig (2022) found that most Americans think abortion should be legal in all cases (61%).⁵

Much of the literature regarding reproductive rights focuses on the case study of the United States and fails to address the discourse used by anti-abortion activists in other countries like Canada. This is likely due to the high level of contention surrounding abortion in America which gains a lot of attention internationally. A study by Saurette and Gordon, in 2013, examines various anti-abortion discourse platforms to fill the existing gap in Canada-based literature. The authors gather information from a Canadian pro-life blog site, organisational websites, and the discourse of MPs with anti-abortion attitudes. Through an examination of this information, they conclude that contemporary Canadian anti-abortion discourse concerns itself with four main aims: the driving of broad cultural change, pro-women framing, the avoidance of religious references and promoting the idea that abortion is harmful to women.

Since the early 1980s, anti-abortion advocates have increasingly

3 Alexa J. Trumpy, "Woman vs. Fetus: Frame Transformation and Intramovement Dynamics in the Pro-Life Movement," *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 2 (February 28, 2014), 163–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2014.878624>.

4 Mugambi Jouet, "A History of Post-Roe America and Canada: From Intertwined Abortion Battles to American Exceptionalism," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4430602>.

5 Hannah Hartig, "About Six-In-Ten Americans Say Abortion Should Be Legal in All or Most Cases," Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/13/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases-2/>.

adopted a pro-woman framing to their messages.⁶ This framing involves arguing that abortion is harmful to women and that banning or regulating abortion is in the woman's best interests.⁷ The pro-woman frame contrasts with the earlier demonisation of women who sought abortions were unmotherly and thus evil.⁸

This earlier demonisation is detailed in "The Traditional Portrait" of abortion sentiments which Saurette and Gordon outline. In contrast to the findings of Saurette and Gordon's 2013 study, "The Traditional Portrait" of abortion, a) aims to change laws through legal and political pressure, b) holds a critical anti-women tone, c) references its religious principles and d) employs a fetal-centric position.⁹ This portrait has been understood as inherently anti-feminist and as holding values which the feminist movement has been fighting against.

Scholars often refer to "Frame Theory" when explaining the motivations driving social mobilisations. Frames are mental schemata which detail how individuals interpret and identify personal experiences in their lives within broader societal contexts.¹⁰ Those with a fetal-centric frame, identify the fetus as a living person who is "killed" by abortion. They may align themselves with organisations which share this framing, such as March For Life. Frame extension involves extending the primary boundaries of the frame to encompass other salient

6 Jennifer Holland, "Abolishing Abortion"; Amanda Roberti, "'Women Deserve Better': the Use of the Pro-Woman Frame in Anti-Abortion Policies in U.S. States," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2021), 207–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477x.2021.1925478>.

7 Jennifer Holland, "Abolishing Abortion"; Reva B. Siegel, "The New Politics of Abortion: An Quality Analysis of Woman-Protective Abortion Restrictions," *University of Illinois Law Review* 2007 (2007), 991. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/unillr2007&div=36&id=&page=>.

8 Paul Saurette and Kelly Gordon, "Arguing Abortion: The New Anti-Abortion Discourse in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 46, no. 1 (2013), 157–85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43298127>.

9 Susan Faludi, *Backlash : The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

10 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis : An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1975).

perspectives, attracting a wider range of followers.¹¹ The pro-life movement has undergone a frame extension in the last few decades. In the US, fetal-centric framing (also known as fetal personhood framing) has been the central frame used by the pro-life movement, at least since the instalment of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.¹² However, since the late 1990s, fetal-personhood framing has been shown to have had little significant impact on US abortion rates and public opinion, this has led to activists also adopting a pro-woman frame in the hope of gaining greater support.¹³ ‘Pro-Women Pro-Life’ (PWPL) activists argue that organisations pressure women into abortions, especially medical companies driven by profit, despite the potential mental and physical health effects.¹⁴ PWPL activists advocate for providing women with alternatives to abortion such as exploring adoption options.

A study conducted in the UK by Lowe and Page found themes in anti-abortion discourse similar to those found by Saurette and Gordon. Lowe and Page (2019) conducted an ethnographic study that included thirty abortion campaigns, taking notes of the geography, signs and language displayed at the sites.¹⁵ They identified four key themes. Firstly, ‘it’s not just about religion’, many protestors stated that religion was not their main motivation. Secondly, ‘unique losses’, arguing that a fetus is a human and deserves equality. Thirdly, ‘Missing People’, argues that the legal system has failed millions of lives by allowing them to be ‘murdered’. Lastly, the reworking of women’s rights argues there is an intrinsic link between womanhood and motherhood, meaning that no woman would naturally want to undergo abortion and it is the result of other pressures. Lowe and Page, and Saurette and Gordon all identify key themes as downplaying religion, pro-women framing and fetal-personhood framing. The paper by Lowe and Page (2019)

11 David A. Snow et al., “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation”, *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (August 1986): 464, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095581>.

12 Alexa J. Trumpy, “Woman vs. Fetus”, 163-84.

13 Amanda Roberti, “Women Deserve Better”, 207-24.

14 Victoria Greenwood and Jock Young, *Abortion in Demand* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

15 Pam Lowe and Sarah-Jane Page, *ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVISM in the UK : Ultra -Sacrificial Motherhood, Religion And... Reproductive Rights in the Public Sphere*. (S.L.: Emerald Group Publ., 2022).

is concerned with reproductive rights in the UK which is not directly applicable to this case study. However, due to a lack of Canada-specific literature and the similar abortion laws in the UK and Canada, the paper is suitable as a base for thematic comparisons along with the Saurette and Gordon paper.

Considering Canada's vast religious diversity, it could be hypothesised a key theme in the data will be the downplaying of religion as a motivator, to appeal to as many supporters as possible. The fetal-personhood framing is a consistent theme across studies, both in Canada in 2013 and the UK in 2019, and so it is hypothesised this theme will appear in recent Canadian pro-life discourse. Furthermore, as a frame extension to the fetal-personhood frame, pro-women framing emerged as a frequent theme across the studies, and it is hypothesised that this will also appear as a key theme in recent Canadian pro-life discourse. Finally, it is hypothesised that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* will have emboldened Canadian pro-life activists in their claims to illegalise abortion.

Methodology

An inductive analysis of anti-abortion protest language was conducted by collating quotes used by anti-abortion activists in their signs used in protests. These quotes were gathered from a range of sources, including in-person observation and online media reports. A variety of online media sources were used, including, pro-life websites, social media accounts, YouTube videos and news reports. Only protests post-dating the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* (after June 24th, 2022) were analysed to investigate the impact of the legislative change.

A range of online media sources which covered anti-abortion protest events were examined. Information was gathered from the following protests: Kelowna on the 26th of July 2022, the 1st of October 2023 and the 21st of November 2023, Ottawa, Toronto and Victoria all on the 11th of May 2023. The three events which occurred on the 11th of May 2023 were all a part of the March for Life campaign which involved protests all over Canada, however, only sufficient data for

the cities listed was found. On the 21st of November, 2023, a ‘peaceful vigil’ was held by the Kelowna Right to Life Society outside Kelowna General Hospital. The signs of the four women in attendance were included in the analysis.

Using the software system MAXQDAAnalytics Pro a thematic analysis of the collected data was conducted.¹⁶ The quotes were organised by location and date, for example, ‘Kelowna 26/07/23’ and coded based on recurring messages. Codes were then grouped into potential themes which were then refined to those pertinent to the research question and ascribed titles as well as explanations.

Ethical Statement

As most data was gathered through secondary sources, it is unclear as to whether participants in videos had given explicit consent to be recorded but due to the public nature of the protests, and that the data is already public, it can be argued that they would be comfortable with this. Additionally, no personally identifiable details were included in the analysis to maximise anonymity. Given that abortion is a deeply sensitive and controversial topic, sensitivity has been used throughout this paper. However, the use of direct quotes from the protests might be distressing to some readers and so a content advisory is recommended. Notably, this paper comes from a pro-choice background, but impartiality has been strived for throughout.

Findings

Data was collected from a total of six protest events which met the appropriate criteria of occurring in Canada after the 24th of June 2022, being a pro-life mobilisation and including physical signs which could be analysed. Across the protests, five significant themes were prevalent: ‘Fetal-Personhood Framing’, ‘Pro-Women Framing’, ‘Legal Based Arguments’, ‘Religious Based Framing’ and ‘Ascribing Negative Emotions to Women who Had Abortions’. A total of 100 sign quotes were collected and coded for, some quotes were assigned

¹⁶ VERBI Software, *MAXQDA 2022*, software, 2021, maxqda.com.

to multiple codes.

Theme One: Fetal-Personhood Framing

All the protests recorded included signs with fetal-personhood framing discourse. This theme included sub-codes of ‘fetus as human’(48% of all quotes), ‘missing people’(3%), activists ‘speaking on behalf of the fetus (6%)’, ‘fetus as a separate body to woman’s’(2%). The theme in total included 61% of all quotes. ‘Fetus as human’ included quotes which distinctly identified fetuses as being human and referred to abortion as killing or murder. A key quote which summarises this sentiment is ‘abortion kills a human being’ from a Toronto protest (11/05/23). The sub-code of ‘missing people’ referred to society’s missing persons due to their ‘killing’ by abortion. A key quote which summarises this sentiment is ‘ABORTION: 1/3 of our Generation is MISSING’ from a protest in Toronto (11/05/23). The sub-code of ‘fetus as a separate body to woman’s’ refers to the fetus having a distinct entity from the mother, suggesting that therefore the woman should not have control over the decisions concerning the fetus’ body. A key quote which summarises this is ‘A BABYS BODY IS NOT YOUR BODY’ from a Victoria protest (11/05/23). Regarding a fetus as a human body forces the audience to consider their own sense of personhood. Murder is universally considered morally wrong and by establishing a persona for a fetus, pro-life activists force onlookers to question the morality of abortion.

Theme Two: Pro-Women Framing

Five out of the six protests included signs with pro-women framing discourse. This theme had only a single code of pro-women which made up 20% of all quotes. Quotes included in the theme were identified as advocating for women and their well-being which abortion places at risk. Some of the quotes provided support and resources for those who might be contemplating abortion, such as ‘PREGNANT? Need Help?’ followed by a phone number (Kelowna 01/10/23). Other quotes argued that abortion was anti-feminist, stating that it was ‘THE ULTIMATE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN’ (Victoria 11/05/23). Quotes like these

directly challenge feminist ideologies and argue that abortion does not help to liberate women. Discourse of this theme includes claims that abortion is a result of women being coerced by ‘corrupt’ doctors who are motivated by profit (Greenwood and Young, 1976). A few quotes seemed to be advocating for both the fetus and the women, illustrating concern for both parties. ‘1 CRIME 2 LIVES’ from a Toronto protest (11/05/23) frames abortion as a criminal activity which is inflicted upon both the pregnant woman and the fetus. This dual advocacy clearly illustrates the pro-woman frame extension which has developed by PWPL activists in recent decades.

Theme Three: Legal Based Arguments:

All the protests recorded included signs with legal-based arguments. This theme included ‘laws and legalities’ (6%), ‘success of Roe v. Wade’ (3%) and ‘rights-based language’ (8%). In total, the theme included 17% of all quotes. The ‘laws and legalities’ quotes refer directly to existing legislation and also urge for abortion laws to be introduced. Quotes like ‘Abortion is legal in all 9 months of pregnancy’, which appeared at a protest in Kelowna (21/11/23), intend to inform onlookers and provoke shock. The sub-code of ‘Roe v. Wade’ refers directly to the legislative reversal with all the quotes in this sub-code celebrating this change. A quote which summarises this sentiment is from a protest in Kelowna the day after the reversal: ‘BRAVO USA for LIFE We’re NEXT CANADA’ (26/07/22). ‘Rights-based language’ is a type of legal-based anti-abortion discourse which intends to empower onlookers and institutions to fight for the rights of the fetus. Quotes like ‘Abortion is a Human Rights Violation’ from Ottawa (11/05/23) try to provoke a sense of responsibility from the public. This argument is weakened by the fact that the United Nations recognises access to safe and legal abortion as a fundamental human right (Article 6, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 2018). Legal language is used to help strengthen the legitimacy of the argument. Its use is rooted in the belief that the law is built to protect you, and in this case, it is not protecting a ‘member of society’. Having faith that the law is working in your best interest is not a privilege that all social groups have but as a consensus does, it seems smart to

outline the law's failings as this violates a core tenant of standing up for injustice. This stands to evoke anger and support for your cause.

Theme Four: Religiously Motivated Discourse

Four out of the six protests included signs with religiously motivated discourse. In total, the theme included 8% of all quotes. A key quote which summarises this sentiment is 'PRAY TO END ABORTION' which appeared on signs in both Victoria (11/05/23) and Ottawa (11/05/23) as part of the 'March for Life'. Asserting a religious background in a protest can both disengage and attract citizens. As Christianity is the most common religion in Canada, attaching Christian values to anti-abortion may help pro-lifers gain more support as they may help garner the perception of abortion as a religious violation.¹⁷ Whilst this theme only appears a relatively small number of times, it appears in over half of the protests.

Theme Five: Ascribing Negative Emotions to Women Who Had Abortions

A few quotes stood out as possibly being hurtful to anyone who had had an abortion, insisting that they must feel guilt or regret. Three out of the six protests included signs and 7% of all quotes were included in this theme. A quote which aptly summarises this theme is 'Mom, please let me live!' with a picture of a fetus from a protest in Kelowna (21/11/23). Signs like these are meant to ascribe negative emotions like guilt to women who had abortions, despite many women often expressing positive feelings, such as relief, afterwards.¹⁸ This conflicts with the pro-women frame which was also seen in a lot of protests.

Conclusion

17 Statistics Canada, "Profile Table, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population - Canada [Country]," www12.statcan.gc.ca, February 9, 2022, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?LANG=E&GENDERlist=1>.

18 Corinne H. Rocca et al., "Emotions and Decision Rightness over Five Years Following an Abortion: An Examination of Decision Difficulty and Abortion Stigma," *Social Science & Medicine* 248 (March 1, 2020): 112704, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112704>.

In conclusion, the current anti-abortion discourse among Canadians seems to be primarily concerned with fetal-personhood framing, pro-women framing, legal-based arguments and religious motivations. As hypothesised, the fetal-personhood frame was the most prevalent theme at protests, with 61% of signs referring to the fetus as having a separate body from the woman and inferring that abortion was immoral and murderous. This supported the studies of Lowe and Page (2019) and Saurette and Gordon (2013) who found fetal-personhood framing to be a prevalent theme in anti-abortion discourse. Providing some consensus on this theme in both UK and Canada both before and after *Roe v. Wade* means that it remains a key idea in anti-abortion discourse.

It was also hypothesised that pro-women framing would be a prevalent theme in post-*Roe v. Wade* anti-abortion discourse, and this was evident by pro-woman framing language appearing in a majority of protests. Some signs argued that abortion was inherently anti-feminist and un-liberating. Other signs stated resources for available help for pregnant women, which offers a concerned perspective. This also supports the findings from the study by Lowe and Page (2019) and Saurette and Gordon (2013) which stated that pro-women framing is prevalent in anti-abortion discourse, arguing that it remains a key theme.

Additionally, some protests included language which advocated for both women and the fetus, further emphasising the impact of the frame extension into the discourse. The research suggests that *Roe v. Wade* may have emboldened pro-life protesters in their argument due to the mention of the legislative decision and rights-based arguments in the discourse. However, it is hard to discern whether the overturning has had a negative or positive influence on fetus-personhood framing, pro-women framing and religious motivations in anti-abortion discourse as while they are dominant in the current research, it is hard to quantify if there has been an increase since there are no numbers to compare to. Further quantitative research is necessary to explore the relationship between the *Roe v. Wade* overturning and wider social shifts concerning science, feminism, and religion.

A theme which was raised in the data which was not hypothesised was the theme of ‘Ascribing Negative Emotions to Women Who Had Abortions’. This included discourse which seemed to want to provoke feelings of regret and guilt from women who had experienced abortions. This subtracts from the pro-women frame which seemed to be heavily reinforced as being adopted in the literature review. Instead, this voices an anti-woman frame which resembles the ‘Traditional Portrait’ of abortion discourse that scholars like Faludi detail. This perhaps shows that the pro-life movement has not progressed past the outdated values it might have thought it had with the adoption of pro-women framing. Guilt and regret are common emotions felt after abortions, alongside relief.¹⁹ By reinforcing the idea that women should be feeling guilty or regretful they are contributing to the mental damage of women which modern pro-lifer activists tend to be advocating against.

It was hypothesised that the downplaying of religion would be prevalent in the anti-abortion discourse however no signs evidenced this. This is surprising as this theme has been found predominantly in the UK, which despite the largest religion being Christianity, it is relatively religiously diverse like Canada.²⁰ Perhaps, Canadian pro-life advocacy has stronger ties to Christianity than UK pro-life organisations meaning their arguments are deeper enforced by religion. Further research should be conducted to examine the connection between Canadian pro-life arguments and Christianity. Potentially, the downplaying of religion was more prevalent in Canada prior to the Roe v. Wade reversal but as a result of increased confidence from legal backing, protestors may feel less of a need now to downplay their religious motivations. This, though, cannot be tested with this research which only focuses on recent protests.

19 Corinne H. Rocca et al., “Emotions and Decision Rightness over Five Years Following an Abortion: An Examination of Decision Difficulty and Abortion Stigma,” *Social Science & Medicine* 248 (March 1, 2020): 112704, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112704>.

20 Office of National Statistics, “Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics,” www.ons.gov.uk, November 29, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>.

A limitation of this research is the lack of reports on pro-life protests available online. This limited the number of protest events able to be examined. It is not clear whether this lack of reports is due to a lack of protests or a lack of reporting. Considering there are weekly protests in a city as relatively small as Kelowna, it can be inferred that weekly protests will occur elsewhere in Canada but finding evidence of this proved difficult. An alternate theory may be that due to the pro-choice stance of the Canadian government and the general public, news reporting might be less likely to amplify pro-life voices.²¹ Of the protest sources that were found, camera quality and angles did mean some data was excluded. Additionally, the quantity of protest signs was not accounted for by this research. For example, at the Ottawa protest, there was multiple signs which stated ‘PRAY TO END ABORTION’ but the number of these signs were not recorded. Future quantitative research could further explore this to see what quotes are most frequent in protests.

Research was limited to protests which spoke in English, despite some protests being in French due to Canada’s official bilingualism. Pro-life protests were found to occur in Montréal and Québec city which would have contributed more quotes to examine and likely enriched the data, but translation risked losing important sentiments and so French quotes were decidedly not included. This could be improved by cooperating with a translator to help ensure English translations of the signs are accurate, however, this goes beyond the resources available to this project.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes data to a relatively under-researched area of literature and has highlighted a few key areas for future research. This research has established what themes are prevalent in anti-abortion discourse, as well as what themes seem to be less prevalent post-Roe v. Wade, with the hopes this can be used by scholars to better understand pro-life motivations and therefore predict how they might utilise language to advocate for abortion law reforms in Canada.

21 Statistics Canada, “Profile Table, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population - Canada [Country]”

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