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The Boundary Work of Commercial Friendship

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With the aim to reconsider lifestyle values in relation to economic rationality in small tourism and hospitality businesses, we focus on the "commercial home" as a site where boundaries between personal and commercial values are constantly performed in practice. Through an interactionist analysis of the narrative of a B&B and gallery owner, we illustrate the emergence of intimacy as a commercial value in the hospitality industry. We analyse the formation of values as a dynamic social process where a traditional market ethos is both rejected and reformulated. We argue that by focusing on the co-creation of value in interactions between producers and consumers, new possibilities to analyse service economy dynamics become visible.

Rural Lifestyle Entrepreneurs

In a society where services have an increasingly important economic impact, the relationship between economic and social exchange is often close. Sometimes there is no distinct boundary between them. Service interactions are transformed into experience products and a form of commercial friendship emerges (Lashley & Morrison, 2003; Price & Arnould, 1999). Consequently, boundaries between private/public and non-commercial/commercial will become a subject for negotiation (see Hochschild, 2003; Seligman, 1998; Sennett, 1993). One area that highlights how a growing service economy, or more specifically an experience economy, reorders these boundaries is businesses in the rural tourism and hospitality sector. This sector features small firms that often combine the service of accommodation with experience offerings such as horse-riding, nature experiences, stone-oven baking and painting courses. Many of the operators of these firms can be called lifestyle entrepreneurs, striving for a correspondence between their own lifestyle values and those of their guests (Andersson Cederholm & Hultman, forthcoming; Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). When the correspondence of lifestyle values is the basis for the enterprise, economic activity becomes situated in the intersection between intimate and commercial life spheres. Guests stay and have meals close to their hosts and socialize with them, and physical proximity may become associated with emotional intimacy.

Research on lifestyle entrepreneurship in the rural hospitality sector has shown how qualities such as more family time and the attraction of specific localities are crucial motivating factors (Andersson et al., 2002; Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Getz et al., 2004; Getz & Carlsen, 2000, 2005; Shaw & Williams, 1987). These businesses are framed by a wider social and cultural context articulated as a discourse of "the good rural life" and "a living countryside", indicating values of social embeddedness and sustainability. Quality of life and locality are thus important aspects of lifestyle entrepreneurship (Marcketti et al., 2006) and business success may be defined in ways that do not correspond with growth-oriented economic measurements (Reijonen, 2008). Practices commonly associated with economic rationality – such as strategic work to gain competitive advantages – are often explicitly rejected (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Di Domenico, 2005; Helgadóttir & Sigurdardóttir, 2008). However, the rejection of economic rationality and a traditional market ethos carries within itself a new set of attitudes towards the market. To understand these attitudes, lifestyle entrepreneurship must be related to the formation of a hospitality discourse where social relations, affect and experiences come together as commercial offerings.

Hospitality discourse formation

In rural lifestyle entrepreneurship where traditional conceptualizations of economic growth and the market are dismissed, lifestyle values are marketed as touristic values, i.e. as commercial propositions aimed at predominantly urban consumers. This means that personal values are translated into economic values. The physical site of business for these entrepreneurs is often the home (see Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007). The home of the host is transformed into a "commercial home" (Lynch & MacWhannell, 2000), and this commercial home becomes the site where boundaries between personal and commercial values are launched into a process of ordering, disordering and reordering. The hosts are not merely providing accommodation, activities and service in the traditional sense, but also the framework for guests to socialize with each other and/or with their hosts. In some cases, socializing is developed into specific business concepts offering guests recreational and self-developing social interactions as part of the experience package. It is here we can begin to trace the genealogy of commercial friendship in current hospitality contexts.

Commercial friendship is a term used by Lashley & Morrison (2003) to describe sociable relations between hospitality producers and guests. The authors see such relations as a result of explicit strategic considerations on part of the producer in an instrumental manner. We want to look at the concept from another perspective and see strategic practices as *emerging from* the negotiations of boundaries between personal and commercial values, rather than *preceding* the host/guest relation. It follows that strategy in lifestyle contexts will not mean the same thing as strategy in typical business contexts. We argue that not only attitudes towards the market but also the notion of strategy as it relates to lifestyle entrepreneurship must be understood in relation to the formation of a hospitality ethos. We will in other words have to understand strategy in relation to affect. To enable such an understanding we use insights from management literature on the interface between businesses and experiences. But this research can be reconceptualised. Management perspectives usually interpret social interactions as either a medium for an individual experience, or as an added-value dimension contributing to a good atmosphere (see Bitner, 1992; Heide & Grønhaug, 2006). The understanding of socializing as merely a by-product of economic exchange is an expression of a general tendency in management research, as well as in popular discourse, to over-emphasise the individual dimension of experience values by regarding them as solely subjective. It is also an expression of a lack of analytical tools in this literature to study economic exchange as a social process; there is often an over-emphasis on the economic aspects of economic exchange. There is a lack of research discussing how these underlying social and emotional values are understood and transformed – in situated social interactions – to values possible to calculate on a market (but see Callon & Muniesa, 2005). A focus on social interaction calls for closer scrutiny of boundaries between production and consumption.

Hospitality value creation

In management and service marketing literature, the traditional dichotomy between consumer and producer has been called into question through the notion of value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). What the term conveys is that value is not created by the design and construction of a product. A product is rather a proposition of potential value aimed at potential consumers, and the value cannot be realized without the consumer. It is not enough that consumers go through with the commercial transaction for value to be realized. Use-in-action of the product by consumers is necessary in order for value to be realized. Value co-creation thus denotes a focus on performativity. There are four specific points stressed in value co-creation literature as critical for producer-consumer interactions that we find relevant for an analysis of meetings between producers and consumers in the context of commercial intimacy: (1) Regardless of type and scale of service business, intensified interaction between producer and consumer is becoming increasingly more important in the marketing of service proposals (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004:7); (2) Intimacy is a vehicle for the differentiation between lifestyle entrepreneurs and what is regarded among lifestyle entrepreneurs as more instrumentally oriented commercial firms. Intimacy can then be viewed as a means for the singularization of service proposals (Callon et al., 2002); (3) Communication between producer and consumer framed by trustful interaction and perceived authenticity is critical for business performance and ethics (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006); (4) In various ways economic transactions are becoming increasingly intertwined with social interaction and the emergence of social communities (Callon, 2007), something which points at the need to situate and investigate this economic/social nexus in a range of different service contexts.

What is often neglected in research on value creation, are analyses of the social and normative construction of what are commonly presumed to be subjective experience values, and how these are constructed in an interactive process between customers, producers and society

(Granovetter, 1985; Steiner, 2009; Zafirovski, 2000). By situating our discussion of value creation in the intersection between economic and intimate life spheres, we will discuss markets as social constructions. However, to frame the analysis with the help of service marketing arguments is not enough to explain how markets are socially constructed and how social intimacy emerges as a commercial value. Value in service management and service marketing literature typically denotes economic value, and value creation processes are understood as business strategies where value equals economic value. Value is often regarded as a genuinely unproblematic variable. To go beyond this understanding of value in order to find tools for the analysis of value and value creation as social processes and to contextualize value creation, we turn to Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* (1900/2004). This classic in economic sociology shows how the construction of economic and non-economic values is a relational process. This allows us to focus upon the process where values are *performed* in producer/consumer interaction. We use the concept of performativity as the continuous becoming-in-action of value (see Baerenholdt et al., 2004; Edensor, 2001; Perkins & Thorns, 2001). We draw upon Simmel's relational notion of value, where economic value is one category among others, for example aesthetic, moral and cultural values (Simmel, 1900/2004, Cantó Milà, 2005). Economic value is, according to Simmel, the category most objectified, manifested in practices of monetary exchange. The notion of distance is central in Simmel's analysis and a crucial aspect of value realization. When distance is introduced between a subject and an object, desire emerges and later develops into the concept of value. Distance places the object in relation to other objects (Simmel, 1900/2004: 59) paving the way for strategies of singularization of products (Callon et al., 2002) on a socially constructed market.

Situated boundary work

To operationalize the analysis of the dynamics of value construction – to see how distance is enacted in a situated context – we use the concept of boundary work (see Allen, 2001; Gieryn, 1983; Goode and Greatbatch, 2005; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Zelizer, 2005; Åkerström, 2002). This refers to ordering practices which create, maintain, and recreate cultural and/or cognitive categories, in our case categories related to space, social relations and value. We highlight the border between what are considered economic and non-economic spheres – more specifically personal values on one hand, and collective values possible to transform into commercial values on the other – and discuss how this border is moved and transgressed in lifestyle entrepreneurship. What we do, in other words, is to understand the narratives and performativity of lifestyle entrepreneurship as instances of boundary work where value is co-created through the reordering of the border between production and consumption in practice.

The relationship between hosts and guests in the small-scale tourism and hospitality sector features emotions such as joy, disappointment, irritation and shame. Emotions in this context is partly related to the notion of emotional labour, a concept introduced by Hochschild (1983, 2003) who studied the emotional work in service labour where the service provider – often a woman – is expected to evoke positive emotional responses in the customer. The concept is used in studies of service interactions with a clear asymmetrical power relationship with no or little mutual emotional response, where the service provider gives (or sells), and the customer takes (or consumes). However, this differs from the case of small-scale tourism and hospitality firms, where the business often builds upon lifestyle motifs. Lifestyle businesses do not show the same asymmetrical relationship between provider and guest as for instance the air-stewardess and the passengers (Hochschild, 1983), and the expectations on professional roles are not scripted. To the lifestyle entrepreneur, emotions evoked by interactions with customers facilitate the commoditization of personal lifestyle values, since a sense of togetherness is not only a social value but also an emerging commercial value. This means that the emotional labour of lifestyle entrepreneurs should be understood in relation to a cultural and economic

context where rural life connotes “the good life” through the potential for social embeddedness, which is a value with great power of attraction on a tourism market. Additionally, one important condition is a social discourse encouraging entrepreneurship and the development of small enterprises (Berglund, 2007). The societal support for starting a business may encourage new modes of self-development and identity construction through the potential of making a living. This development then contributes to the formation of norms and ideals of lifestyle entrepreneurship, and legitimizes the emergence of specific values that are attractive on an experience market.

Co-creation of affect and intimacy – an empirical example

We will proceed to examine everyday practices and narratives of lifestyle entrepreneurship by an analysis of how personal and commercial values are socially constructed. We will visit the home of a lifestyle entrepreneur – Lisa – and focus upon how practices characterized by specific emotional qualities are performed. Warmth, trust, spontaneity, sometimes chaos, and proximity are dimensions in the intimate experience – or even intimacy product – we will discuss.

Lisa runs a B&B combined with an art gallery by the shore at the outskirts of a middle-sized town in Scania. Lisa is in her fifties with grown-up children and grandchildren. She is divorced since some years and lives by herself in a small and picturesque cottage. We have chosen Lisa as a case study because her narrative and her business are ideal-typical – in the Weberian meaning of the term – of a lifestyle entrepreneur in relation to approximately 20 other informants in rural tourism and hospitality businesses that we have interviewed 2006-2008. She gives primacy to values and qualities such as for example the small scale, control over all aspects of the business, close contact and communication with guests, the affective importance of the specific locality, intimate knowledge of surrounding areas, and a focus on issues of care-taking. We discuss this through the development of three themes: the time-space of commercial friendship, the in-between space of the private and the public, and the value of intimacy.

The time-space of commercial friendship

The hospitality practices performed by Lisa give her a similar sense of satisfaction as that experienced by her guests. Lisa mentions several examples of relationships with her guests that appear as aspects of friendship: the joy of socializing, spontaneity, trust and rituals such as sending Christmas cards.

Even though the hospitality performed in Lisa’s business is characterized by homeliness and intimacy, it is still different from the practices of a private home. Inviting paying guests is not like inviting friends or family. According to the stories told by Lisa, warmth and spontaneity should appear as unexpected surprises. This is illustrated through anecdotes on how Lisa finds a sofa for the unexpected guest, or let the guest sleep in her own bed while she has to find a bed in the basement. Warmth and instant familiarity are discernible as specific experience values, values that are socially constructed as experiences worth having. This is, however, only possible in explicit contrast to a “rational” and standardized service context common in market-driven, commercial hospitality firms. The friendship relations evolving seem to be framed in a specific time-space, similar to what Price & Arnould in their analysis of commercial friendships between hairstylists and their clients, describe as “compartmentalized” (1999:12). Their study showed how friendship relations among service provider and client may emerge, but are often limited to the service context. Even though the clients and hairdressers may develop an intimate relationship of mutual trust and self-disclosure in the salon, meetings outside this context may be out of the question. The situated character of the commercial friendship in the context of the hospitality industry is expressed through the non-

urable, or “possibly non-durable” character of the relationship. Lisa sometimes gets invitations from the guests to come and visit them in their home. She tells us that she might consider visits her guests, but while saying this she comments with a smile of self-reflexion “...but then they may not recognize me”. Hence, commercial friendship in the hospitality context seems to be situated in a place characterized by a tension between intimacy and distance. A certain amount of social distance is introduced by the temporal and spatial limitations of the service context (“you are not friends all the time”). Distance is also introduced by how popular expectations of commercial hospitality as relatively standardized and anonymous differ from hospitality practices in Lisa’s own commercial home, as the boundary work ordering private and public spaces shows.

The in-between space of the private and the public

The complex nature of the commercial home providing intimacy as an experience value may not only invoke trust, but insecurity and ambivalence as well. Physical, social and emotional boundaries are ordered, transgressed and reordered. Lisa and her guests perform this boundary work in everyday situations, sometimes articulated verbally, sometimes in a more corporeal manner. For example, when Lisa takes her guest on a tour around the house, pointing out their room and hers and encourages them to sit down and relax and have their meals in the atelier, the fine lines between private and public space are performed. Another manner of boundary work is through stories of the norm breakers. In Lisa’s narrative, two kinds of deviants appear, representing opposed expectations of the commercial home: those that expect more efficient and standardized services, and those who treat the place too much like their own home. As a way of avoiding the former, Lisa prefers to have personal contact with potential guests before they book rooms. She can then get a feeling for if they are the “wrong” kind of customers and discourage them to come. She avoids the booking system Citybreak™ administered by the local tourist office. Here, guests can book themselves into registered accommodations on a web page. One important reason for not signing up with this system is the lack of first-hand personal contact and thus the lost opportunity to vet visitors. At the other end of the deviant spectrum are guests treating her place too much as their own home. She tells us about the Austrian young men who undressed in the kitchen, the guests who ate grandmother’s cake when they failed to realize that Lisa had set the table for her own private family party, or the boys who without announcing brought girls to their rooms, causing embarrassment at the following breakfast. These examples become amusing anecdotes and were all regarded as harmless: “I sometimes become a mother to my guests”. In this way, stories of deviance become a mediator in the boundary work to negotiate private and public spaces.

The value of intimacy

When we asked Lisa what her guests appreciate most, she quickly mentions the locality, the beautiful surroundings, popular attractions nearby easily found in tourist brochures and the possibility for recreational activities such as walks and bicycle tours. It is the kind of attraction categories often described in marketing material, standardized and clearly framed as values for the tourist. However, except from this direct question and quick ready-made answer, Lisa’s story is full of descriptions of other more intangible values, such as the atmosphere, the spontaneous, the personal and the intimate. These values are simultaneously described as values for herself and values for the customers. While talking about these values, Lisa juxtaposes the personal B&B with the standardized and efficient service of a Hilton hotel where the guest knows what to expect, but will not experience the personal touch. Lisa emphasises the personal and intimate as a value many people search for. She thus recognizes its collective and social importance, although she does not frame intimacy as a typical tourist value. A similar example is the value of storytelling, where Lisa often takes the opportunity of telling her

guests the tales of her family heritage, how the family industry was founded 300 years ago, how her grandfather built the cottage, and about the furniture and other characteristics of her home. In this way, personal values become tourist values. She recognizes the potential of the commercial value of storytelling since she describes it as belonging to her standard repertoire for entertaining of her guests:

...then when the weather is bad we use to sit in the atelier, I serve coffee and... I have always a lot of suggestion on what to do in the surroundings [...] and they enjoy hearing about the house and I always have some funny anecdotes about the house, because that is what I think people appreciate with B&B, because when you stay at a hotel, Best Western or Hilton or whatever, you have a nice cleaned room and everything, but you will not have that contact with the local milieu [...] many people like it because it is so old fashioned and charming, and I tell them about my family's history [...]

- So you are a real local...?

-Yes [laughter] and I take advantage of that a little bit, with the tourists...

Even though this practice of storytelling has a clear value for guests, it is at the same time related to Lisa's own collection of experiences. This negotiation of values between boundaries of the subjective and the commercial illustrates value formation as a social process. Our analysis also points at the importance of specific media, or consolidating catalysts, such as marketing material and tourist brochures in the social construction of values in an emerging hospitality discourse.

Hospitality strategies?

Lisa's narrative is structured by a clear dissociation from typical strategic, economic thinking when she explains her motives for running a business. Associated with her B&B is an atelier where she paints, sells art and gives painting courses to guests. She describes how she first realized that she might make a living out of her hobby:

I have always painted because I enjoy it, and then, by coincidence, a relative of mine came for a visit and said Oh, I want to buy that painting! How much does it cost? Cost? How should I know? I give you 400. 400!? It is much too expensive, it is not possible. It must be a lot cheaper! 200... No, I give you 400... and so it continued, and finally it ended at 300. And then I went out to buy a notebook and I started to make a note whenever I sold a painting. So that was fun!

Lisa describes all her activities, not only her painting and the painting courses, as emerging by coincidence. In her narrative, they evolve organically with one incident leading to another. The "by coincidence" attitude is accompanied with her reluctance to start a business in the first place. With a certain pride she says that someone else was actually responsible for taking the initiative. One day, one of her daughters brought her to the tourist office to discuss her business, and her other daughter helps her with marketing. She states that she is not a business woman: "I am just the same old bohemian artist as before, I just try to make this work as well... I have no claims on running a 'good business', I just do it by intuition". When she tells about her recent engagement in local tourism business networks and meetings, she speaks about it with both delight ("I have never been to meetings in my entire life, it was so fun") and distance towards the institutionalized social obligations that come with professional economic relations ("I just do it [engage herself in networks] as long as it suits my life and schedule"). The tales of creation characterized by a "by coincidence" attitude, as well as her non-identification with the image of a professional and well-organized business woman,

emerges as a way of rejecting the ideals and images of an instrumental market ethos. She acknowledges the need for marketing strategies and planning, but by handing over responsibility to others she can still retain the role of the non-typical business woman.

Everyday activities and encounters with guests follow the same ideal. Lisa tells several anecdotes of how she has to improvise to handle unforeseen situations such as guests arriving late in the evening without a booking, and how she lets them sleep in her private room while she has to find another place to sleep : ”... and then there was this girl, she had been bicycling for three days and she said ‘do you really not have any room for me?’ ... OK, then, I say, I will sleep down in the basement”. She often stresses the importance of being flexible and creative and having the ability to improvise, but the way she talks about this quality does not make it appear as a necessary dimension of a professional role. Rather, flexibility and the ability to improvise are expressed as her own personal traits and part of her general attitude to life. To improvise and to handle things spontaneously emerge in her narrative as the ideal way of being. Her anecdotes about being flexible are primarily about being hospitable, of providing warmth and intimacy. By stressing the chaotic situations that arise, she stresses the importance of social relationships with her guests. The personal relationship becomes the primary product, despite – or because – the lack of dimensions deemed critical in service business discourse:

There was this wedding party [...] a Swedish girl was about to marry a boy from Boston and his whole lovely large American Jewish family would come... and I had made a buffet and served it in the atelier... and they were so pleased... and it rained and it rained, like a tropical rain, and everything went alright until I suddenly saw... I didn’t believe my eyes... how the water started to pour into the room, like a waterfall, there was a blockage in the drainpipe and all the water just poured in... In that same moment I saw in the corner of my other eye how someone had opened the door towards the sea... it was so crowded... and the rain poured in and ‘sh-t, I have to do something!’. So I grabbed some carpets because it was flowing on the floor and I threw towels on the windows and the guests thought that was really funny... and I asked the guests afterwards how everything had been and they said that ‘Oh, it was such a wonderful party’ ... ‘but didn’t you notice all the rain coming in...?’ ‘Oh, no, it was so little, it was just fun’ [laughter].

The customers were pleased despite the pouring rain and a wet floor, and Lisa’s spontaneous actions could in management terminology be interpreted as a service strategy to have satisfied customers although the performed product was not what the customers originally expected. The surprise value is greater than the original value proposal. This is only one part of the truth though, since for Lisa entertaining guests is to a great extent about satisfying herself, and by doing that, she constructs an identity as a lifestyle entrepreneur where the business acts as a medium to gain personal experiences. Lisa rejects the typical market ethos by dissociating herself and her performance from the images and discourses of a commercial and strategic service business, and by emphasising the intrinsic values of the relationship with the guests. However, she still recognizes the economic value of the “by coincidence” attitude by emphasising how pleased the guests are: parts of the narrative that features chaotic or unforeseen situations and the subsequent need to improvise are followed by testimonials of satisfaction among guests. This rejection of economic rationality – at the same time as value is created in social interaction – thus makes sense as a strategic practice if viewed in the light of the formation of a hospitality ethos.

Concluding discussion

Through an empirical example of life-style entrepreneurship, where we have used the narrative of B&B and gallery owner Lisa as our ideal-typical case, we have illuminated ways in

which a market ethos is simultaneously rejected and embraced. Earlier studies of lifestyle entrepreneurs have concluded that the market ethos is rejected in favour of personal values as motivating factors for doing business – indeed, this is the very rationale behind the heading *lifestyle* entrepreneurs. But by viewing lifestyle entrepreneurship in relation to boundaries between production and consumption, in combination with a service marketing discourse on value co-creation, we conclude that attitudes towards the market are not always straightforward. Through a “by coincidence” attitude and dissociation from the role of a typical rational business manager, as well as through the emphasis on intrinsic values concerning relationships with guests, a commercially instrumental market ethos is rejected. However, the case illustrates intimacy as an experience value emerging and being consolidated in the everyday practices of a commercialized home in the hospitality industry. Hereby, the lifestyle entrepreneur performs a new and more complex type of market ethos. The emergence of new meanings, practices and ideals of a market and how market relations should be performed is highlighted through the formation of a hospitality ethos that includes intimacy as a critical value.

We have highlighted the similarities between producers and consumers to enable a discussion on the performativity of value co-creation. By discussing the *time-space of commercial friendship*, we illustrated the constrained character of a commercial friendship, experienced and narrated as sincere and even difficult to distinguish from non-commercial friendships but not necessarily long term or recurring. One dimension in this type of friendship is the situated trust developed between host and guest. We identified the *in-between-space of the private and the public* as an ambivalent zone encouraging boundary work, where the fine lines between a home and a “commercial home” are ordered and reordered. Tales of deviance are means of definition in this boundary work. We then exemplified how *the value of intimacy* is negotiated in relation to instrumental hospitality businesses. Finally, we speculated how these three themes can be understood as a singularization strategy when seen in relation to the narrative thread of dissociation from a traditional market ethos. The analysis highlights the delicate balance between intimacy and distance, which we suggest is a condition for the transformation of intimacy into a commercial value.

Understood as a commercial actor who performs the ordering and reordering of boundaries between production and consumption through the practice of value co-creation with customers, the lifestyle entrepreneur embodies the discourse of innovative service management and marketing. As Lisa exemplifies, intimacy is used to differentiate lifestyle businesses from other kinds of comparable economic activities; the interaction between producer and consumer is at the heart of the commercial offering; communication between producer and consumer framed by trust and perceived authenticity is central; and the economic transaction between producer and consumer is inseparable from social interaction and the formation of intimate social relations. Furthermore, intimacy indicates a perceived uniqueness in the relationship. This works towards the singularization of a service proposal in relation to other, comparable service proposals, hereby making the singularized proposal attractive. Consequently, intimacy may be seen as a strategic asset in the formation of a hospitality ethos. The formation of intimacy as a value points to the emergence of new meanings and practices in service markets. However, intimacy as a strategic asset is not an a priori condition, but one that emerges in a situated reality where intimacy as a value is socially constructed in a delicate tension between intimacy and distance. With this conclusion, the analysis opens up for further investigations of the complexities of lifestyle entrepreneurship, value co-creation and the reordering of boundaries between production and consumption, and the practices and meanings of intimacy and friendship in a service economy.

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