

THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL SUSTAINABILITY FOR SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS IN ASIA-PACIFIC

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurs and the likelihood of re-investing their profits to serve the social or environmental purpose of their enterprises, is triggered by a variety of individual factors. This study explores the relationship between market-oriented product, service or process-related innovation and the likelihood that social entrepreneurs reinvest their profits towards their purpose of their enterprises. Utilizing Global Entrepreneurship Monitor data of ten Asia-Pacific countries, this empirical study investigates if product-, service -or process-related innovation is positively related to an increase in those social enterprises, who reinvest profits towards social goals. Our regression analysis findings show the importance of bringing innovative products and services to the market, combined with the educational level of the social entrepreneur in order to reach entrepreneurial sustainability. With research gaps on social entrepreneurship activities in the Asia-Pacific region and innovation as a driver for the sustainability of social enterprises in reinvesting profits towards their purpose, we point out that social entrepreneurship ventures need long-term nurturing, sustainable business models and innovative products and services to sustain their businesses.

Keywords :Asia-Pacific; innovation; social entrepreneurship; sustainability; youth

Introduction

To foster entrepreneurship, policy makers need to understand what influences individuals to attain sustained entrepreneurial success, especially in social enterprises. The aim of our paper

is to explore the influence of market-oriented innovation in products and services or of production process-related innovation on the likelihood of social entrepreneurs to be involved in a more narrow definition of social entrepreneurship (Bosma et al, 2016).



This definition of a sustainable social enterprise entails the re-investment of their profits to serve the social or environmental purpose of their enterprise which applies only to 50 % of the social entrepreneurs globally (Bosma et al, 2016), thus contributing more to their business purpose by creating sustainable social enterprises.

Social entrepreneurship can be divided into two sub concepts: (1) approach- or impact-related, such as market orientation, social value creation, social entrepreneur, and social enterprise (Choi & Majumdar 2014); and (2) entrepreneur-related such as entrepreneurial innovation, entrepreneurial intent, entrepreneurial compassion, and entrepreneurial abilities. All social enterprises are affected by diverse contextual complexities to sustainably pursue both social and economic missions (Alvord et al, 2004; Miller et al, 2012; Mort et al, 2003; Tan et al, 2005). In a global comparison, Southeast Asia is the region with the least number of social entrepreneurs at just 3.8 % of the working-age population (Bosma et al., 2016). Social entrepreneurship in general, and entrepreneurship related to the United Nations' Sustainable SDGs in specific, is in the focus of many organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. There is a research gap on social entrepreneurship activities in the Asia-Pacific region in general (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017), and innovation as a driver for the sustainability of social enterprises in re-investing profits towards their social or environmental goal in specific. This empirical study explores if innovation of entrepreneurs in products,

services and processes leads to those desirable social enterprises that re-invest their profits to achieve their social or environmental goals, in series making both enterprises and goals more sustainable. To do so, we employ the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2015 individual-level data in a pooled sample of the ten countries Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. We perform regression analysis in search for drivers significantly affecting the individual entrepreneur to be socially responsible and sustainable through innovation activities.

Social entrepreneurship

The 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the important role in achieving the SDGs or 'Global Goals'. Amongst others, it calls for action against the challenges faced by youth and other vulnerable groups that limit their economic, social and political inclusion. In today's highly connected world, people are more creative and more informed than any previous generation and are responding to the daily challenges with innovative approaches, contributing fresh ideas, creating the world they want, and driving human development for themselves, their communities and their societies (Guelich & Bosma, 2019).

Social entrepreneurs start and lead ventures seeking innovate solutions to address society's most pressing problems (Ashoka 2016; Bloom 2012). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Special Topic Report on Social Entrepreneurship (Bosma et al, 2016), early-stage social entrepreneurial activity



varies globally and lags behind commercial entrepreneurial activities (Terjesen et al, 2016). Measured by the percentage of adults between ages 18 to 64, who are currently trying to start a social purpose business, the global average of social entrepreneurship is 3.2 %. By comparison, the rate of start-up commercial entrepreneurship in the same regions is on average more than twice as high with 7.6 % globally. Of the world's social entrepreneurs, an estimated 55 % are male and 45 % are female – a gender gap that is less pronounced than in commercial entrepreneurship. The gender gap in commercial entrepreneurship is globally 2:1, which implies that women are half as likely to start a business as men (Terjesen et al, 2016). World regions with the highest social entrepreneurial activity, both in the start-up phase and the operational phase, are the United States and Australia (11 %), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (9 %). Southeast Asia is the region with the least number of social entrepreneurs at just 3.8 % of the adult population (Bosma et al., 2016).

There is no one-size-fits-all blueprint for institutions to enhance social entrepreneurship. Some studies favour the institutional void perspective (e.g. Mair & Marti, 2006), referring to the idea that -with an absence of institutional support in an environment where problems are abundant- motivation for social entrepreneurship increases. A countervailing perspective to this is institutional support, which explains that more active governments are able to reinforce social entrepreneurship (Stephan et al, 2015). Although most studies agree on the importance of governance activism, these two

perspectives are important to keep in mind for policy implications.

Youth social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial sustainability

Despite research gaps on youth social entrepreneurship, the practice of youth social entrepreneurship is currently increasing (Hodne, Liu, Lloyd, Lyon, Owen, Perales, Laouri Faulb, Hay, and Raman, 2019; Kruse 2019). Academic research mostly focuses on youth social entrepreneurship “in its infancy ... [however] the practice [of youth social entrepreneurship] has been well under way” (Kruse 2019, p.14). Youth today are launching social entrepreneurial initiatives with “ideas and passion to make incredible change in their local communities, in the country, and in the world” (Future Coalition, 2021, “What We Do”). In general, youth differ from adults with regard to their societal roles, power dynamics, propensity to engage in prosocial behaviours, outlook on life, and patterns of thinking (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson 2014; Blankenstein et al. 2020). Youth tend to have powerful ideas and are able to act upon them with the aim to create positive change. Even though some behavioural tendencies of youth have been perceived more negatively, such as risk taking, challenging authority and status quo, youth may find and pursue innovative approaches to societal and environmental challenges and engage in social entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2016).

There is a research gap on social entrepreneurship activities in the Asia-Pacific region in general (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017), and innovation as a driver



for the sustainability of social enterprises in reinvesting profits towards their social or environmental goal in specific. This reinvestment of profits is considered one of the most important features of a social enterprise. Europe DTI (2002, p.13) defines a social enterprise as a business “with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximize profit for shareholders and owners”. Bosma et al. (2016) point out, that only half of the social enterprises reinvest all of their profits towards their purpose. In addition, Guelich & Bosma (2019) found, that a concerning factor with social enterprises in Asia-Pacific is, that many of them tend to experience problems turning their nascent enterprises into operational businesses and making them sustainable. We therefore conclude that –if they are making profits and are able to reinvest towards their purpose- these social entrepreneurs are among those who can create entrepreneurial sustainability.

Innovation and new products and markets

An often overseen feature in entrepreneurship is the innovation-orientation of entrepreneurs, which is a necessary underlying feature for long-term success. Entrepreneurship and innovation are closely linked and positively related (Miller & Friesen, 1982) and the innovation process is an important factor for firm performance and economic growth (Yu & Si, 2012). Entrepreneurial innovation has transitioned from being considered a technology-driven process of the mid-twentieth century to an integrated process

of the twenty-first century (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017). The capability to innovate relates to several research fields, strategy and organization, which link to classic managerial theories of the firm and its growth (Schumpeter, 1934). Drucker (1985) pointed out that an entrepreneur is always in search for any opportunity caused by change, to which he/she responds with innovation, thereby driving economic progress at macro and micro economic levels. All these theories introduce the importance of seeking innovative use for existing corporate resources to enable new ideas, processes and products.

Enterprises need to apply innovation to generate new business models through new or improved products, services, or processes which is crucial for their social advancement (Guelich & Bosma, 2019). From a different point of view, entrepreneurship is regarded from a value-creation perspective. Any entrepreneur can create value with more or less innovation - as an innovator or as a reproducer (Aldrich & Kenworthy, 1999), where innovators enter the market with significantly different approaches, practices and competencies than reproducers, who add little or no innovativeness to their existing markets. Bhide (2000) reports that 88 % of the world’s entrepreneurs succeed because they excel at the exceptional execution of an ordinary idea, meaning that they will transfer something existing or reproductive and execute it exceptionally well. However, the remaining 12 % succeed by executing on an unusual or extraordinary idea, an innovation, which usually is generated by themselves. In this case, entirely new industries could evolve and these often disruptive new



ideas create change and fuel economic growth (Yu & Si, 2012).

Entrepreneurs in developing countries who tend to be further away from the international technological frontier will therefore often be actively pursuing innovations that are new to their market or new to their firm. In this case, the innovation already exists in another market, but is now adopted by a given firm. Authors have mentioned innovations as technology-push and market-pull innovations (Geum et al, 2016; Horbach et al, 2012). Technology-push innovations originate from scientists or knowledgeable persons in the field of technical and business implications (Dosi, 1988; Workman, 1993), while market-pull innovations are either extensions or modifications of existing products, processes or ideas that have implications from the market and the industry (Dosi, 1988; Tushman & Anderson, 1986). This could encompass innovations that are led by industry-specific knowledge.

The innovation concept according to the Oxford Handbook of Innovation refers to putting inventions into practice (Fagerberg et al, 2005). A more narrow approach focuses specifically on innovation in products, services and / or processes or technological innovations as the result of knowledge-intensive technological entrepreneurship (Mas-Tur & Soriano, 2014). The broader approach refers to innovation as the development of new products and services or new processes, unique to a market or the world, as a key driver of business growth and job creation. The exploitation of new markets and the development of new ways to do business with a distinction ranges from incremental to disruptive

innovations (Szirmai et al, 2011). Levie defines innovation confidence as “the degree to which individuals are willing to engage with and perceive benefit from new products or services, or products or services that embody new technology” (Levie, 2008, p.4).

Some entrepreneurs risk to be innovative in order to generate business profits to create social value (Tan et al., 2005). These entrepreneurs, symbolizing a more altruistic version of entrepreneurship, have come to be known as social entrepreneurs. They are often community based, with a dual mission of meeting social or environmental as well as economic goals. Business decisions of a social entrepreneur depend on what drives him/her in the balance between market-orientation and societal needs (Masseti, 2008). In addition, social innovation targets problems in a different, more pointed way. By taking advantage of current needs, exploiting diverse available resources and building capacities, these social entrepreneurs address both the empowerment of underprivileged groups as a systemic change of the social, economic and institutional structures, which create these problems (Portales, 2019). Economists, change and thought leaders, forward-looking governments, industries and societies have increasingly articulated the need for entrepreneurial innovation to achieve high impact to progress economies. This entrepreneur would be driven by compassion (Miller et al., 2012) and would be risk tolerant, disciplined, innovative and skilled at recognizing opportunities and assembling resources to challenge existing social and economic structures for creating social value (Hill et al, 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize:



H1: Innovation in products and services positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes.

H2: Innovation in processes positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes.

The Asia-Pacific region

The Asia and the Pacific region consists of extremely diverse economies, including countries with the largest and smallest populations in the world, some of the wealthiest as well as some of the least developed countries (Litsareva, 2017). The region also remains home to two-thirds of the world's extreme poor living on less than US\$1.90 a day, with widening income inequality in many countries in recent years (Litsareva, 2017). These growing disparities will have implications for achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including efforts to promote social cohesion and the overarching pledge to “leave no one behind” (UNCDP, 2018, p.1). Under these circumstances, increasing social entrepreneurship rates in general, and entrepreneurship related to the Sustainable Development Goals in specific, is in the focus of many organizations.

With respect to innovation levels and in a global comparison, the Asia-Pacific region ranks behind North America and Europe and before Africa and Latin America & Caribbean (Bosma et al., 2016). 25.4 % of start-ups and young businesses in Asia-Pacific regard their products or services as new to all or some customers *and* perceive few or no

competitors with the same product on offer (Guelich & Bosma, 2019). Many entrepreneurs in Asia and the Pacific pursue to reproduce products and services, also known as a “me too” approach in their entrepreneurial activities. However, the CPA Australia Asia-Pacific Small Business Survey (2016) shows that, regardless of market, small businesses with younger owners below 40 years of age are significantly more likely to be growing their enterprises, creating jobs if they focus on innovation, export, social media or training.

Educational level in Asia-Pacific

In the GEM study, the educational stages are subdivisions of formal learning, typically covering early childhood education, primary education, secondary education and tertiary (or higher) education. In order to be able to conduct cross-country comparisons, GEM utilizes the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) classification, which recognizes seven levels of education in its International Standard Classification of Education system (ISCED). In Asia-Pacific, findings reveal, that the higher the educational level is, the higher the entrepreneurial attitudes and activities are, regardless of age. Large country differences with respect to the educational levels prevail between attitudes, intentions and entrepreneurial activities (Guelich & Bosma, 2019).

The level of education may be a factor in explaining the number of social enterprises (Estrin, Mickiewicz &



Stephan, 2016), but differs substantially for social entrepreneurs across the globe (Bosma et al, 2016). The US and Australia report notably higher proportions of social entrepreneurs with a high level of education (62 %), while in MENA (Middle East and North Africa), Eastern and Western Europe around half of the social entrepreneurs are highly educated. Since Asia-Pacific comprises many under-developed regions and some of the lowest social entrepreneurship rates of the world, we hypothesize that

H3: The educational level positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes.

Research design and methodology

Data used in this study are from the GEM project, an ongoing large-scale research project, designed to collect data on entrepreneurial activities, aspirations and behaviour across countries. Each year, a random representative sample of the adult population (age 18 to 64) is surveyed in each country to identify individuals who, at the time of the survey, owned and managed a business or were in the process of starting one. (Bosma, 2013).

This empirical study utilizes GEM data from 2015, collected in the 10 countries Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. The total sample size of the adult populations in the 10 countries was 29,089 respondents, of which 1,712 were social entrepreneurs age 18 to 64, who -alone or with others- were currently trying to start or currently

leading any kind of activity that has a social, environmental or community objective. Educational stages in GEM utilize the UNESCO classification from Level 0 (pre-primary education) through Level 6 (second stage of tertiary education). They are defined as follows: (1) Level 1 or lowest level of education: UNESCO stages 0, 1 or 2: pre-primary education, primary education or first stage of basic education, lower secondary or second stage of basic education; (2) Level 2 or medium level of education: UNESCO stages 3 or 4: (upper) secondary education, post-secondary non-tertiary education; and (3) Level 3 or high level of education: UNESCO stages 5 or 6: first stage of tertiary education, secondary stage of tertiary education.

Linear regression analysis is used to answer the questions: (1) if innovation in products and services and/or (2) innovation in processes are positive predictors for social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes, and (3) if the educational level positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes.

Dependent variable DV is “reinvesting profits for social and environmental goals” (SEPROFIT: “Profits will be reinvested to serve the social or environmental purpose of my organization”).

We control for SEMARKET (operating in the market by producing goods and services), AGE (age), gender, KNOWENT (do you know someone who started a business in the last 2 years?), OPPORT (do you see opportunities to start a business?), SUSKILL (do you perceive to have the right skills to start a business?), and GENDER (gender).

Results

A limited percentage of 5.9 % of the adult population in Asia-Pacific is involved in social entrepreneurship, be it as nascent or already operational entrepreneurs. The range for the broadest measure of social entrepreneurship is between 0.2 % of start-ups in Korea to 7.1 % in the Philippines. Social entrepreneurs in the operating phase range from 1.4 % in Vietnam to 11.1 % in Australia. Least active in social entrepreneurial activity are entrepreneurs in Vietnam, South Korea, Iran and Malaysia compared to the most active social entrepreneurs in Australia and the Philippines. Differences exist for commercial entrepreneurship where Malaysian enterprises are by far the least active (3 %) and entrepreneurs from Indonesia (17.7 %) and the Philippines (17.2 %) the most active. However, applying the narrow definition of social entrepreneurship, fewer entrepreneurs focus mainly on their social purpose in their start-up phase: from 0.2 % in South Korea to 3.5 % in the Philippines.

Furthermore, operational entrepreneurs with a social purpose range from 0.3 % in Vietnam and Iran to 5.6 % in Australia.

For nearly every economy in the Asia-Pacific region, the social entrepreneurship activity rates are highest for entrepreneurs with tertiary education except India and Vietnam, where secondary education resulted in social start-ups. Social entrepreneurial activities for secondary and tertiary education levels are more prevalent for the older age group. No gender gap exists with respect to social start-up rates and level 3 education. Overall, male entrepreneurs show slightly higher levels of social activities with respect to education.

Table 1 shows the results of the linear regression analysis with the dependent variable “Profits will be reinvested to serve the social or environmental purpose of my organization”. Overall significance is .000 with the three significant predictor variables in the model: offering products or services that are new to the market, offering a new way of producing a product or service, and education.

Table 1 Regression results for ‘Reinvesting profits for social and environmental goals’

	Beta	Sig.
Offering products or services that are new to the market	.279	.000
Offering a new way of producing a product or service	.067	.322
Education	.180	.001
Age	-.029	.600
Operating in the market by producing goods and services	.151	.020
Entrepreneurial network	-.028	.620
Perceived opportunities	-.023	.691
Perceived skills and capabilities	-.007	.913
Gender	.077	.146



Offering products and services that are new to the market proves to be positively significant at .279/.000 and thus confirms hypothesis *H1: Innovation in products and services positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes*. However, innovation in processes is not significant and therefore *H2: Innovation in processes positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes* is not confirmed. Also confirmed is that the educational level (.180/.001) is important for a sustainable social enterprise to be able to reinvest profits towards their purpose, thus *H3: The educational level positively increases the likelihood of social enterprises that re-invest in their social and environmental causes* is confirmed.

Interestingly, it is also positively significant (.151/.020) that operating in the market by producing goods and services is another predictor for reinvestment of profits towards the entrepreneurial purpose. We conclude, that our construct in general positively points into a right direction, also because the amount of variance that is explained by the independent variables in R Square shows a strength of association with a level of 24.7 %.

Discussion

United Nation's strategy to support youth to turn their "ideas into action" acknowledges that youth are "a vast source of innovation, ideas, and solutions" who are providing vital change and leadership on the global climate crisis, social justice, and

technology (United Nations 2018). This UN initiative acknowledges that young social entrepreneurs have great potential to lead positive change in the world today. As the objective of any social innovation is to address a problem more efficiently and effectively than done previously, our findings support Portales (2019), that it is important to promote social change integrally and holistically. However, we go beyond the environmental and societal change alone. The sustainability of the social enterprise itself can only contribute to generate new social, economic, institutional, and even cultural structures which then transform conditions or causes, if the entrepreneur is able to lead the businesses into an operational and finally established business phase. As the majority of youth-led social enterprises does not make it beyond the start-up phase (Guelich & Bosma, 2019), our research contributes to understanding how to realize the potential success of youth social entrepreneurs by identifying where support is needed to make them successful in the long term.

In Asia-Pacific specifically, clear relationships exist between introducing innovative products, services or processes and expected business growth, between innovation and future job creation, and between innovation and business growth (Guelich & Bosma, 2019). Entrepreneurs in general have higher innovation confidence than non-entrepreneurs (Levie, 2008). Entrepreneurial innovation is therefore a core driver of economic growth, business growth and job creation. Similarly, this is true for social enterprises who are active in the market with goods and services, which enables them to make money. Combining this with innovation in



products and services and a certain educational level, will increase the likelihood that their social enterprises might be among those who can sustain to an operational phase. As a result, they will be among the 50 % of social enterprises (Guelich & Bosma, 2019), who reinvest their profits and achieve their social and environmental goals. Reinvestment of their profits implies that their businesses previously earned a profit, which directly relates to more sustainable business models. A wider knowledge about the drivers of sustainability could have tremendous impact on social enterprises' success, because the majority of social enterprises -youth and older entrepreneurs- struggle to sustain their businesses beyond the start-up phase. To increase impact on these social enterprises, organizations, governments, and educational institutions should work together to increase innovativeness in products and services and implement the right support programs for youth social entrepreneurs.

Conclusions

As the Asia-Pacific region includes some of the wealthiest as well as some of the least developed countries in the world, disparities are growing with implications for achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the overarching pledge to “leave no one behind” (UNCDP, 2018, p.1). The region also hosts the largest generation of youth in history. Organizations, such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), target youth to enter entrepreneurship around the SDGs. Our findings support this concept of UNDP; however, we point out that youth

social entrepreneurship needs to be nurtured in the long term, with sustainable business models and innovative products, services and processes. Governments not only need to rethink their existing education systems from primary to tertiary educational levels, but also how and with which programs they can enhance innovation in youth entrepreneurs, enabling them to reinvest their profits towards their SDG purpose, thus becoming sustainable. Social entrepreneurship-targeted government funding is needed, that takes into account which challenges and limitations are prevalent in currently existing funding programs for social entrepreneurs with respect to innovativeness.

The results of the study are valuable for both academia and practitioners. The finding, that operating in the market by producing goods and services as a predictor for social entrepreneurs to reinvest their profits for their purpose, needs further exploration. Clearly, it is necessary to be in a market with products or services to make a profit and in series to be able to reinvest. However, a deeper investigation is needed to specify what exactly needs to be done in the market to strengthen this finding. Following the findings of Stephan et al (2015), that governments that are more active are able to reinforce social entrepreneurship, this calls for action for governments, governmental institutions as well as for private organizations. This could take place in areas such as access to funding, supportive funding options by government and the private sector, and raising awareness of the importance of the SDGs. As our results show that –in the Asia-Pacific region- tertiary level of education supports social



entrepreneurship, these stakeholders specifically need to target the primary and secondary education level to increase the probability of social entrepreneurship. Topics should include not only innovation and creativity, but also entrepreneurship general education to result in a higher level of sustainable social enterprises. In practice of higher education, the findings suggest to incorporate training on innovation mindset building, creation of alternative funding concepts and other supportive framework conditions and the use of the UN SDGs as an opportunity concept into the higher educational organization itself. This will challenge universities to change from their tradition of being a managerial hierarchical institution to becoming a more entrepreneurial educational institution.

Limitations of this study is the time of data collection in 2015, as the awareness for the importance for social enterprises increased in the last few years, accelerated in the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in a higher number of social enterprises now compared to 2015. Data that are more recent might reveal different or more nuanced information on the interaction between innovativeness, education and social enterprises. In addition, the recent rapid technological changes during the Covid-19 pandemic could accelerate innovativeness in social enterprises, which might lead to new findings. This study comprises 10 countries in Asia-Pacific, and a generalization to overall Asia-Pacific might not be possible. Therefore,

utilizing the findings of this study for comparisons of Asia-Pacific to other larger regions, such as e.g. Europe, might result in inaccurate results.

As the influence of education on innovative behaviour is documented, further studies could investigate the interplay between the level of education and innovation in products and services to find the reasons, what specifically triggers the purpose to reinvest profits. Overcoming the innovation obstacle for social enterprises can lead to a sustainable economic business development with higher profitability and more value-added goods and services. Gaining more insights in the different prevalent types of government support for social enterprises in the Asia-Pacific region and –if they support innovation or only the social and environmental impact- might lead to innovation-specific approaches towards their social or environmental goal. The interplay between youth social enterprises, universities, governments and organizations targeting youth initiatives could help to empower youth to a new level in the Asia-Pacific region.

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