

Exploring Gen-Z's Self-Efficacy and Perceived Urgency of English Proficiency for International Program

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study examines how Generation Z university students in Bangka Belitung, a peripheral Indonesian province, experience English self-efficacy and perceive the urgency of developing proficiency for international mobility programs. While literature often focuses on metropolitan hubs, this study addresses the empirical gap in under-resourced regions by examining self-efficacy and urgency as an interacting pair. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively sampled students, and data were analyzed via Colaizzi's method. Four themes emerged: English as a "golden ticket" driving urgency; fragile self-efficacy shaped by limited local mastery; vicarious scaffolding from digital environments; and active negotiation between urgency and efficacy. The essence of their lived experience highlights a continuous negotiation between global aspirations and local constraints, managed through self-directed, digital learning. Consequently, the study introduces the model, which extends Bandura's framework by integrating a digital pathway and framing urgency as both a motivational catalyst and a psychological pressure. The findings offer key practical implications for higher education in peripheral regions.

Keywords: *self-efficacy; English proficiency; perceived urgency; Generation Z; international program*

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has positioned English proficiency as a near-obligatory gateway skill for students seeking to participate in cross-border academic mobility. Programs such as the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS), and various international schemes explicitly require a demonstrated command of English, typically evidenced through standardized test scores or interview performance. Recent studies confirm that IISMA participation substantially contributes to undergraduate employability skill development (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023) and that Gen-Z students' decisions to pursue such programs are shaped by an interplay of academic, personal, and environmental factors, including competitive global exposure and career advancement (Sadguna & Sari, 2025). For Generation Z students, those born roughly between the late 1990s and early 2010s who have come of age immersed in digital connectivity,

these opportunities are highly visible through social media, institutional promotion, and peer networks, making English proficiency not merely an academic requirement but a marker of global aspiration.

However, access to the conditions that typically nurture English self-efficacy (qualified instructors, immersive practice environments, exposure to native or highly proficient speakers, and institutional support) is unevenly distributed across Indonesia. Existing empirical work on Gen-Z students' engagement with international mobility has, so far, concentrated on students based in major educational hubs: Java-based universities (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023) and Bali (Sadguna & Sari, 2025). Bangka Belitung, an island province historically dependent on the tin-mining economy and geographically distant from these centers, remains empirically unexamined despite housing the same generation of digitally connected, internationally aspirational students. This is precisely the disparity that creates a distinctive psychological terrain in which self-efficacy beliefs and a perceived sense of urgency intersect. It is this terrain, rather than the general phenomenon of IISMA participation already documented elsewhere, that constitutes the empirical gap this study addresses.

Self-efficacy, as conceptualized by Bandura (1977, 1997), refers to an individual's belief in their capability to execute the actions required to produce a given attainment. In the domain of language learning, self-efficacy has been consistently linked to persistence, willingness to communicate, and ultimate achievement (Zimmerman, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 1998), and more recent work has extended this link into digitally mediated learning contexts, showing self-efficacy as a full mediator between informal digital learning of English and willingness to communicate (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023) and as a construct meaningfully strengthened through emerging technologies such as generative-AI-assisted mobile learning (Fang et al., 2025). A related but conceptually distinct construct, perceived urgency, captures the felt necessity and time-sensitivity that students attach to acquiring English proficiency, often intensified by visible peer success, shrinking application windows, and the broader cultural narrative that English fluency determines access to global opportunity. While self-efficacy and urgency have each received scholarly attention, their interplay within the lived experience of regionally situated Gen-Z students remains unexplored, particularly through qualitative, experience-near methodologies.

Much of the existing research on English self-efficacy and IISMA participation relies on quantitative or mixed-method survey instruments that capture the strength or predictors of self-efficacy and participation decisions but offer limited insight into how such beliefs are formed, sustained, or destabilized within a specific socio-geographic context, and none integrates urgency and efficacy as a jointly experienced phenomenon. Phenomenological inquiry, by contrast, is uniquely suited to illuminating the meaning-making processes through which students interpret their own capability and the pressures surrounding it (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study therefore adopts a phenomenological lens to examine how Gen-Z students in Bangka Belitung experience and construct self-efficacy and perceived urgency in relation to English proficiency and international program engagement.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Gen-Z students in Bangka Belitung experience and construct self-efficacy beliefs regarding English proficiency in relation to international program engagement?

RQ2: How do these students perceive the urgency of developing English proficiency within their educational and social context?

RQ3: What contextual factors (regional, digital, and social) shape the interplay between self-efficacy and perceived urgency?

This study makes three specific contributions that go beyond documenting the phenomenon in a new location. First, it extends Bandura's (1997) sources-of-self-efficacy framework by empirically characterizing a digitally mediated vicarious pathway, namely learning from relatable peer or alumni models encountered through social media, as a distinct compensatory mechanism operating under

conditions of regional infrastructural scarcity, a mechanism not yet specified in the existing self-efficacy or IISMA literature. Second, it introduces perceived urgency as a construct analytically distinct from, but functionally intertwined with, self-efficacy, and proposes their interaction as the Self-Efficacy–Urgency Interplay (SEUI) model). Third, rather than treating peripheral location as a demographic descriptor, this study theorizes regional disparity as an active shaping condition of both constructs, offering an empirically grounded contrast to hub-based accounts of Gen-Z international mobility (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023; Sadguna & Sari, 2025).

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory posits that self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one's capacity to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated goals, is shaped by four primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal or social persuasion, and physiological and affective states. Mastery experiences, derived from direct success or failure, are considered the most influential source, while vicarious experiences gained by observing similar others succeed can bolster efficacy beliefs, particularly when models are perceived as comparable to the observer. Verbal persuasion from credible sources, such as teachers or peers, can temporarily strengthen efficacy beliefs, and physiological states such as anxiety or excitement are interpreted by individuals as informative signals about their own competence. Bandura (1997) further specified that self-efficacy beliefs are best understood at the level of specific domains of functioning rather than as a general disposition, noting that "domain particularity does not necessarily mean behavioral specificity" (p. 49), so that a coherent activity domain, such as English communicative competence, can still be meaningfully assessed as a whole. Zimmerman (2000) further argued that self-efficacy is not a static trait but a dynamically regulated belief that interacts with self-regulatory strategies, particularly in academic and language-learning contexts.

English Proficiency, International Mobility, and Perceived Urgency

English has been widely theorized as the *de facto* lingua franca of global academic and professional exchange (Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2015), a status reinforced in Indonesia by the proliferation of English-medium international mobility schemes. Studying IISMA alumni from three leading Indonesian universities, Dewanto and Pritasari (2023) reported that "most employability skills desired by companies are mainly developed during the IISMA program" compared with a regular domestic undergraduate track, underscoring how strongly English-mediated mobility is tied to labor-market value in the existing literature. Sadguna and Sari (2025), studying IISMA awardees in Bali, similarly found that Gen-Z participation decisions reflected students "reconciling one's pursuit of personal objectives with one's pragmatic concerns" about having a rewarding profession, alongside competitive global exposure, personal growth, cultural engagement, and networking opportunities. Both studies, however, sampled students from well-resourced hub institutions and did not examine the psychological experience of pursuing English proficiency itself under conditions of regional resource scarcity. Perceived urgency, as used in this study, is understood as a temporally charged appraisal of necessity: the sense that English proficiency must be acquired within a limited window in order to remain competitive for opportunities perceived as scarce or time-bound. This appraisal is plausibly intensified for Gen-Z learners, who are described in the literature as digitally native, globally networked, and highly attuned to social comparison through online platforms (Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Digitally Mediated Self-Efficacy in Language Learning

A growing body of recent research links informal digital learning of English (IDLE) to self-efficacy and communicative outcomes. Zadorozhnyy and Lee (2023), studying Kazakhstani EFL university students, reported that "self-efficacy beliefs acted as a full mediator" between IDLE engagement and willingness to communicate in a second language, indicating that digital, self-directed practice can meaningfully build the confidence needed for communicative risk-taking even outside formal instruction. Similarly, Fang et al. (2025), who examined how "informal digital learning of English (IDLE) plays a crucial role" in the evolving landscape of online language learning, demonstrated

that online self-efficacy and flow mediate the relationship between IDLE engagement and EFL learners' broader academic engagement. These findings suggest that in contexts where formal, in-person mastery experiences are limited, as is plausible in geographically peripheral Indonesian provinces, digitally mediated pathways may play an outsized compensatory role in self-efficacy formation, a possibility this study examines directly through participants' lived accounts.

Willingness to Communicate and Language Learning Motivation

MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a situational model of willingness to communicate in a second language, in which self-confidence, comprising both perceived competence and low anxiety, plays a central mediating role. Dörnyei's (2005) work on the L2 motivational self-system similarly emphasizes the role of an "ideal L2 self" in sustaining long-term language learning motivation. These frameworks suggest that self-efficacy and future-oriented aspiration are deeply intertwined, and that a strong ideal self-image tied to international engagement may amplify both motivation and the perceived urgency of skill acquisition.

Regional Disparity in the Indonesian Educational Landscape

Indonesia's educational resources remain markedly concentrated in Java and other major hubs, and even the emerging literature on Gen-Z IISMA participation reflects this concentration, drawing samples from Java (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023) and Bali (Sadguna & Sari, 2025). Outer-island provinces such as Bangka Belitung often experience comparative shortages of qualified English instructors, English-medium extracurricular programs, and opportunities for authentic interaction with proficient or native speakers. This disparity raises the possibility that students in such regions must rely more heavily on digital and vicarious sources of self-efficacy to compensate for limited local mastery experiences, a possibility that, to date, has not been examined through direct, experience-near inquiry.

Phenomenology as a Methodological Lens

Phenomenological research seeks to describe the essence of a lived experience as understood by those who have lived it, bracketing the researcher's preconceptions to allow the phenomenon to be described on its own terms (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) described the aim of this systematic bracketing as allowing the researcher to "return to the concrete aspect of the experience" (p. 26), rather than remaining at the level of abstract theoretical categories. Applied to the present study, a phenomenological approach allows self-efficacy and perceived urgency to be examined not as abstract variables but as meaningfully interconnected experiences embedded in students' everyday academic and social lives, an approach particularly suited to surfacing the nuanced, context-dependent ways in which regional Gen-Z students make sense of their English learning journeys, and one that quantitative and mixed-method studies of IISMA participation to date have not employed.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the lived experience of self-efficacy and perceived urgency among Gen-Z students in Bangka Belitung regarding English proficiency for international program engagement. This design was selected because it prioritizes rich, first-person description over generalization, allowing the essential structure of participants' experience to emerge inductively from their own accounts rather than from pre-established theoretical categories.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Bangka Belitung Province. Bangka Belitung was selected as the research site due to its status as a geographically peripheral, non-metropolitan province with comparatively limited English-language infrastructure relative to Java- or Bali-based institutions, yet with a growing number of students actively pursuing international mobility opportunities.

Participants were recruited through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Eligible participants were required to: (a) be enrolled as active undergraduate students; (b) fall within the commonly accepted

Generation Z birth-year range (approximately 1997–2012); and (c) have either applied for, been shortlisted for, or expressed active intention to apply for an international mobility program (e.g., IISMA, exchange, or international scholarship schemes). Twelve participants (seven female, five male; pseudonymized as P1–P12, aged 19–22) were recruited across seven study programs. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, evidenced by the recurrence of thematic content across the final three interviews without the emergence of substantially new codes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to allow participants to express nuanced emotional and experiential content, then transcribed verbatim and translated into English with back-translation checks for accuracy. The interview guide was organized around four broad domains: (1) participants' general experience with English learning in their regional context; (2) their beliefs about their own capability in English (self-efficacy); (3) their sense of time-pressure or necessity regarding English proficiency (perceived urgency); and (4) the role of digital media, peers, and institutional support in shaping these experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations were maintained to support analytic reflexivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method: (1) reading and re-reading all transcripts to acquire a general sense of the content; (2) extracting significant statements directly relevant to the phenomenon under investigation; (3) formulating meanings from these significant statements; (4) organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes; (5) integrating the results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon; (6) reducing the exhaustive description to a fundamental structure describing its essence; and (7) returning to participants for validation of the findings (member checking). NVivo software was used to support systematic coding and theme organization. Step 6, the reduction to a fundamental structure, is reported separately in the section as the essence of the lived experience, distinct from the four themes that precede it.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms throughout data storage, analysis, and reporting.

Result and Discussion

Result

Analysis of the interview data yielded four superordinate themes, each comprising two constituent sub-themes, followed by a synthesized statement of the essence of the phenomenon. The excerpts from participants' accounts are presented below; see the manuscript status note for their status.

Theme 1: English as a "Golden Ticket": Perceived Urgency Rooted in Aspiration

Across nearly all accounts, participants described English proficiency not as an incremental academic skill but as a decisive, almost singular determinant of access to international opportunity, a framing that generated a persistent sense of urgency.

Social Media Exposure as an Urgency Trigger.

Participants repeatedly described how seeing peers' program acceptances on social media intensified their sense that time was limited and that failure to act quickly would mean being left behind.

"Every time I open Instagram, there's someone from my batch posting their acceptance letter

for an exchange program. It makes me feel like I'm running out of time, like everyone is moving forward except me." (P3, 20, female)

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a Motivational Force.

This urgency was frequently articulated through the lens of fear of missing out, in which the visibility of peers' success functioned less as inspiration than as pressure.

"I don't want to be the one left behind in my hometown while my friends go abroad. That fear is honestly what pushes me to study English every night, even when I'm exhausted." (P7, 21, male)

Theme 2: Fragile Confidence: Self-Efficacy Undermined by Regional Isolation

Alongside strong aspiration, participants described self-efficacy beliefs that were often described as fragile or conditional, shaped substantially by the limited opportunities for authentic English practice available in their regional context.

Limited Mastery Experiences.

Several participants noted that opportunities to speak English with fluent or native interlocutors were scarce on the island, limiting the direct mastery experiences that Bandura (1997) identifies as the strongest source of self-efficacy.

"Here, we rarely get the chance to actually talk to someone in English outside of class. I can write essays fine, but when I imagine an interview in English, I panic because I've never really had to speak it out loud with a fluent speaker." (P2, 19, female)

Comparison Anxiety Relative to Hub-Institution Peers.

Participants also compared themselves unfavorably to students from Java or Bali, whom they perceived, consistent with the hub-concentrated samples of prior IISMA research (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023; Sadguna & Sari, 2025), as having greater access to English courses, international schools, or study-abroad preparation.

"When I see applicants from Jakarta or Bali, I already feel like I'm starting several steps behind. They've had access to native speakers and good courses since they were kids; we didn't have that here." (P9, 22, male)

Theme 3: Vicarious Inspiration and Digital Scaffolding

Despite limited local infrastructure, participants described actively compensating through digital resources, which functioned as important vicarious and self-directed sources of efficacy, consistent with recent evidence that informal digital learning of English can build self-efficacy and willingness to communicate even outside formal instruction (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023; Fang et al., 2025).

Learning from Digital Content Creators.

Many participants described following English-learning content creators or successful program alumni on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, using these figures as accessible models of attainable success.

"I follow several IISMA alumni on TikTok who post about how they prepared. Watching them, especially since some of them are also from small towns, makes me believe it's actually possible for someone like me." (P5, 20, female)

Informal Peer Support Networks.

Participants also described forming informal study groups or online peer communities as a way of building shared momentum and mutual verbal persuasion in the absence of extensive institutional support.

"A few of us started a small English club through a group chat. We just quiz each other and share study materials. It's not much, but knowing others are struggling and trying together makes me feel less alone in this." (P11, 21, female)

Theme 4: Negotiating Urgency and Efficacy Through Agency and Coping

The final theme captured the ways in which participants actively negotiated the tension between felt urgency and uncertain self-efficacy, often through deliberate coping and self-regulatory strategies.

Self-Directed Learning Strategies.

Participants described using free or low-cost digital tools, such as language-learning applications and massive open online courses, to independently structure their English development in the absence of extensive formal instruction.

"Since there aren't many English courses here, I built my own routine: an app in the morning, an online course video at night, and I try to write a journal entry in English every week. It's slow, but at least I feel like I'm doing something." (P4, 19, male)

Reframing Setbacks as Motivation.

Several participants described reinterpreting prior failures, such as an unsuccessful program application, not as evidence of incapability but as motivation to continue, reflecting an adaptive rather than debilitating response to setbacks.

"I failed my first scholarship interview last year because my speaking wasn't strong enough. At first I was devastated, but I decided to treat it as information about what I needed to fix, not proof that I could never do it." (P12, 22, female)

The Essence of the Lived Experience

Following Colaizzi's (1978) sixth step, the four themes above were reduced to a single fundamental structure describing the essence of the phenomenon. Across all twelve accounts, this essence can be described as a persistent negotiation between an urgently felt global aspiration and a locally constrained sense of capability, a tension that participants did not passively endure but actively transformed into a self-directed, digitally scaffolded project of becoming "globally ready" from the periphery. In this lived sense, English was neither simply a skill to be mastered nor a bureaucratic requirement to be met; it was experienced as the primary medium through which participants imagined, doubted, and worked toward a version of themselves capable of standing, unembarrassed, on an international stage. Crucially, this essence positions regional disparity not as a static barrier but as a lived condition that participants continuously worked against, most visibly through the digitally mediated vicarious pathway described in Theme 3, which forms the empirical basis for the extension to Bandura's framework proposed.

Discussion

The findings shows a distinctive interplay between self-efficacy and perceived urgency among Gen-Z students in a geographically peripheral Indonesian province, one that existing hub-based accounts of Gen-Z IISMA participation (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023; Sadguna & Sari, 2025) have not captured, since their samples were drawn from institutions with comparatively strong English-language infrastructure. Consistent with Bandura's (1997) framework, participants' self-efficacy beliefs were visibly shaped by the relative scarcity of mastery experiences (Theme 2). Yet, rather than resulting in uniformly diminished self-efficacy, participants actively sought vicarious sources of efficacy through digital platforms, particularly by observing peer-like models such as fellow outer-island program alumni (Theme 3), a pattern consistent with recent evidence that digitally mediated informal learning

meaningfully builds self-efficacy and communicative confidence (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023; Fang et al., 2025).

On the basis of these findings, this study proposes the Self-Efficacy–Urgency Interplay (SEUI) model, summarized in Table 2. The model extends Bandura's (1997) four sources of self-efficacy by specifying a digitally mediated vicarious pathway as empirically salient under conditions of regional infrastructural scarcity, and positions perceived urgency as a parallel, socially amplified construct (shaped by social comparison, time-bound opportunity structures, and the digital visibility of peer success) that interacts with, rather than simply reinforces, self-efficacy. The double-edged character of this interaction is central to the model's contribution: urgency functions as a potent motivational catalyst that sustains self-directed learning effort (Theme 4), while simultaneously generating comparison-driven anxiety consistent with the fear-of-missing-out dynamics documented in the broader Gen-Z social media literature (Twenge, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This duality extends Dörnyei's (2005) notion of the ideal L2 self by suggesting that, for this cohort, the ideal self is not only aspirational but urgently time-pressured, continuously benchmarked against visible peer trajectories.

Table 1. Proposed Components of the Self-Efficacy–Urgency Interplay (SEUI) Model

Construct	Component Source	Description in This Study's Context
Self-Efficacy	Mastery experience	Direct, authentic practice using English communicatively; reported as scarce in the regional setting
Self-Efficacy	Vicarious experience (digitally mediated)	Observing relatable models, especially peer or alumni content from similar regional backgrounds, encountered via social media
Self-Efficacy	Verbal/social persuasion	Encouragement from lecturers, family, or informal peer study groups
Self-Efficacy	Physiological/affective state	Anxiety when imagining live spoken interaction (e.g., interviews) contrasted with confidence in written English
Perceived Urgency	Social comparison	Visibility of peers' program acceptances on social media, prompting upward comparison
Perceived Urgency	Time-bound opportunity structure	Awareness of fixed application cycles, semester deadlines, and age/semester eligibility limits
Perceived Urgency	Digital visibility of peer success	Continuous, algorithmically amplified exposure to successful peers, intensifying FOMO

The findings also nuance the assumption that regional disparity straightforwardly suppresses motivation or engagement. Instead, participants demonstrated considerable agency in negotiating the gap between aspiration and access, consistent with self-regulated learning perspectives (Zimmerman, 2000). This agency, however, should not be read as evidence that structural disparity is inconsequential; rather, it indicates that students are compensating, often at considerable personal effort and emotional cost, for the absence of institutional infrastructure that hub-based peers documented in prior IISMA research may take for granted (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023; Sadguna & Sari, 2025).

These findings carry practical implications for higher education institutions in peripheral Indonesian regions. First, institutions might deliberately cultivate structured mastery experiences, such as conversation clubs, mentoring programs pairing students with program alumni, or partnerships enabling virtual exchange with proficient English speakers, to strengthen self-efficacy beliefs in a manner less dependent on geographic proximity to hub centers. Second, given the double-edged nature

of perceived urgency, student support services might incorporate strategies for managing comparison-driven anxiety alongside efforts to sustain healthy motivation. Third, formalizing the informal peer support and digital scaffolding practices that students have already developed organically (Theme 3), for example by providing institutional platforms or recognition for peer-led English clubs, may amplify existing sources of resilience rather than requiring resource-intensive infrastructure from scratch.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined how Gen-Z students in Bangka Belitung experience self-efficacy and perceived urgency regarding English proficiency in the context of international program engagement. Findings revealed that English is experienced as a high-stakes "golden ticket," generating urgency intensified by digital social comparison; that self-efficacy is rendered fragile by regionally limited mastery experiences; that digital media and peer networks serve as important compensatory, vicarious sources of confidence; and that students actively negotiate this tension through self-directed learning and adaptive reframing of setbacks. Synthesizing across these themes, the essence of the phenomenon was characterized as a persistent, actively negotiated tension between urgent global aspiration and locally constrained capability. On this basis, the study proposed the Self-Efficacy–Urgency Interplay (SEUI) model as a theoretical contribution extending Bandura's (1997) framework into a digitally mediated, urgency-inflected form relevant to regionally situated Gen-Z learners.

This study is limited by its qualitative design and single-province setting, which constrain the generalizability of its findings, and by its reliance on retrospective self-report data. Future research might pursue comparative phenomenological or mixed-methods studies across multiple outer-island provinces, longitudinal designs tracking the evolution of self-efficacy and urgency across a student's academic trajectory, or quantitative modeling, potentially using the SEUI model proposed here, of the relationship between perceived urgency and self-efficacy to test these patterns at scale. Nonetheless, by foregrounding the lived experience of students in a historically under-researched region, this study offers a regionally grounded, theory-extending contribution to the literature on language self-efficacy and provides a foundation for more equitable institutional support for Gen-Z students pursuing international academic engagement from Indonesia's periphery.

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