Perfectionism, Perceived Rejection, and Subjective Well-Being in University Students

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore how perfectionism and feelings of rejection are related to subjective well-being in university students. The sample comprised 320 students (159 men and 161 women), aged 18-30, who were recruited from universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) was used to measure three dimensions of perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). They also completed the Feeling of Rejection (subscale of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale) (Goodenow, 1993) and the Student Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (SSWQ; Renshaw, 2015), which includes subscales for school connectedness, joy of learning, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. Correlation analysis showed that perfectionism (self-oriented perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism) were negatively related to feelings of rejection. Self-oriented perfectionism was positively associated with joy of learning, school connectedness, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. Socially prescribed perfectionism was positively associated with joy of learning, educational purpose and, academic efficacy. Feelings of rejection were negatively related to joy of learning, school connectedness, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. Multiple regression analysis revealed that self-oriented perfectionism was positively predicting joy of learning ($\beta = .31, p < .05$), school connectedness ($\beta = .20, p < .001$), educational purpose ($\beta = .32, p < .01$), and academic efficacy ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). Feeling of rejection negatively predicted joy of learning ($\beta = -.27, p < .05$), school connectedness ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$), educational purpose ($\beta = -.14, p < .05$) and academic efficacy ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$). The findings hold valuable insights for mental health professionals and educational researchers, emphasizing the need to promote adaptive perfectionism and address rejection sensitivity to enhance students' emotional and academic well-being.

Keywords: Perfectionism, feelings of rejection, subjective well-being, university students

Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is often marked by emotional instability and increased vulnerability to risky behaviors (Arnett, 2000). Epidemiological data indicate that it is a critical period during which individuals are particularly vulnerable to developing psychological disorders related to emotional dysregulation, including not only internalizing disorders like anxiety and depression but also externalizing disorders such as behavioral and conduct-related issues. In addition to studying emotional processing, regulation, and behavior, it is essential to comprehend the significance of social development in one's behavior (Kessler et al., 2005; Paulus et al., 2021). Certainly, the social environment plays a crucial role in influencing an individual's brain (Blakemore, 2008). The social context

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often compels individuals to strive for higher achievements, present flawless work, and develop perfectionistic tendencies driven by a fear of making mistakes (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Xie et al. (2025) suggested that an increased level of validation-seeking and a decreased level of growth-seeking enhance the chances of vulnerability to depression. Validation seeking is the achievement of a goal to prove one's basic worth, competency, and amiability, while growth seeking is the attainment of a goal with the aim of learning, growth, self-improvement, and self-actualization. In line with current research, validation seeking can be seen as an increasing tendency toward perfectionism and feelings of acceptance, both of which may negatively impact well-being (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2023; Koutra et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2025).

Recent years have witnessed a surge in academic attention towards understanding the role and impact of rejection. An in-depth study of rejection revealed that the experience of rejection is equivalent to the agony of physical injury. Feelings of rejection have catastrophic effects not only on an individual's psychological health but also on society as a whole (Leary, cited in Weir, 2012). The need for positive and long-lasting relationships is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history and is considered as imperative as food and water (DeWall, as cited in Weir, 2012). In addition to this evolutionary need, adolescents' increased tendency to think abstractly about themselves and others is particularly remarkable (Sebastian et al., 2008). It has been observed that various negative outcomes are associated with sense of rejection. A sense of rejection is characterized by an individual's perception of not getting due respect, support, and acceptance from others at school (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). This can also be described as an individual's perception of being excluded or isolated within the school environment, making it challenging to see themselves as part of the school community (Dost & Smith, 2023; Duru, 2007). Hence, feelings of being rejected can lead to feeling excluded and a decreased sense of belongingness (Duru and Arslan, 2014; Ren et al., 2017; Sari, 2013). Numerous researchers have demonstrated that students' exclusion and rejection from peers and teachers in the school environment led to various psychological and emotional issues, including loneliness, depressive symptoms, and substance use etc. (Cemalcilar, 2010; Duru & Arslan, 2014; Osterman, 2000). According to the social risk hypothesis, interpersonal relationships are better understood by looking at the balance between social value and social burden. If the social burden increases or matches the social value, the individual faces a greater risk of rejection (Allen et al., 2004). People are highly motivated to avoid social rejection as it leads to a sudden drop in positive emotions and elevates negative emotions. Numerous studies in psychology and neuroscience indicate that emotions significantly impact students' motivation, social resources, memory, and learning (Lewis et al., 2008; Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000). A wide range of negative emotions is inversely associated with academic performance and overall achievement scores (Gumora & Arsenio, 2002).

There are several other psychological variables threatening the subjective well-being of students. Among them, research has investigated the relationship between perfectionism and subjective well-being. Perfectionism refers to a tendency to aim for impeccable outcomes, often accompanied by unrealistic expectations and severe self-evaluation (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Koutra et al, 2023). The framework given by Hewitt and Flett (1991) remains the most prominent and extensively studied conceptualization of perfectionism. This model distinguishes three primary dimensions based on the interpersonal source and orientation of

standards: self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) involves an individual setting high standards for themselves along with rigid guidelines and self-evaluation; other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), involves an individual imposing exceptionally high expectations on others and critically evaluating their performance; and socially prescribed perfectionism (SSP), involves a drive to meet high standards perceived as imposed by others (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Numerous studies revealed that a broad array of psychopathologies has been caused by the trait of perfectionism. For instance, existing literature suggested that perfectionism is positively related to psychological issues, including depressive symptoms, anxiousness, eating disturbances, suicidal ideation etc. (Flett et al., 2002; Flett et al., 2003; Lilienfeld et al., 2006). Ahmad and Munir (2022) found no direct association between perfectionism and students' well-being, but a recent study (Zhang et al., 2025) found academic perfectionism to positively correlate with suicidal ideation among Pakistani pre-medical students. Chang and Rand (2000) suggested that socially prescribed perfectionists have a greater tendency to depressive symptoms as compared to self-oriented perfectionists, as their focus is on expectations imposed by others. However, perfectionism has some positive or healthy effects, like self-oriented perfectionists exhibit elevated levels of motivation for learning, adaptation, self-actualization, goal orientation, and better self-reported health (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002; Molnar et al., 2006).

The current research aims to examine which aspects of perfectionism contribute to either adaptive or maladaptive effects. Research on the impact of perfectionism is not only important from a theoretical perspective but also from a clinical point of view. While perfectionism and rejection have been linked to compromised well-being, recent evidence suggests that their interaction may compound emotional vulnerabilities, particularly during adolescence. Within Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model, socially prescribed perfectionism may predispose individuals to rejection sensitivity. When adolescents internalize external standards and link self-worth to external validation, any perceived social exclusion may not only threaten their need for belonging but also affirm their perceived failure to meet imposed ideals. As the literature reveals that perfectionism is one of the significant factors predicting psychopathologies, therefore, therapists must know about the beneficial as well as detrimental facets of perfectionism. A deeper understanding of perfectionism is essential for effectively addressing individuals' health and well-being. Despite growing global research on these constructs, studies within the Pakistani educational and cultural context remain limited. Cultural dynamics such as collectivism, high parental expectations, and academic pressure may shape the expression of perfectionism and experiences of rejection differently from Western societies.

In a study conducted on university students in Multan, Mahmood et al. (2023) investigated how multidimensional perfectionism relates to educational procrastination. The researchers found that increased levels of perfectionism were directly related to increased academic procrastination. This procrastination may arise from fear of not meeting self-imposed high standards, thus potentially causing feelings of inadequacy and rejection. Parveen and Khan (2024) reported that students with higher levels of self-oriented perfectionism show greater academic engagement, suggesting a positive relationship between perfectionism and academic involvement. However, if students perceive their efforts as insufficient, feelings of rejection and burnout could emerge. The current research not only

highlights the importance of perfectionism but also sheds light on feelings of rejection on subjective well-being. There is a growing interest among researchers and educationists in social rejection as it has been shown to negatively impact individuals' well-being and achievement levels. So, the objective of the current study is to assess the relationship between perfectionism, feelings of rejection and subjective well-being. The present study might significantly contribute to not only expanding the horizon of knowledge but also helping educationists, clinicians, and policymakers in the context of a collectivistic culture.

Hypotheses

H1: Self-oriented perfectionism is likely to be positively related, while other-oriented perfectionism, social prescribed perfectionism, and feeling of rejection are likely to be negatively related to university students' subjective well-being.

H2: Perfectionism and feelings of rejection are likely to predict of students' subjective well-being.

Method

Research Design

The present study used a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the association between perfectionism, perceived rejection, and subjective well-being among university students. Due to limited time and accessibility, data was gathered using a convenience sampling method, enabling efficient participant recruitment. These study variables were measured through standardized self-report questionnaires.

Sample

A sample of 320 students was taken, comprising 159 males and 161 females from different universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad in Pakistan. The age range of participants was 18 to 30 years ($M_{age} = 21.86$, $SD = 2.54$). 53 % of the sample comprised undergraduate students while 46.87% were postgraduate university students. Additionally, 50.94% of the participants belonged to nuclear families and 49.06% to joint families.

Instruments

Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991)

It has 45 items that assess three dimensions of perfectionism. These dimensions are self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), which reflects an individual's desire to be flawless in everything they do (e.g., "I strive to be perfect in all aspects of my life"); other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), which refers to having high expectations for others (e.g., "I set high standards for the people I care about"); and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), which involves perceiving that others, particularly family members, expect perfection from oneself (e.g., "I feel that my family expects me to be flawless"). Respondents answer these statements on a 7-point Likert scale. High score on each dimension suggests a stronger tendency toward perfectionism in that area. The alpha reliability coefficients for the subscales have been found to range from .83 to .95, indicating strong internal consistency (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha reliabilities of SOP, OOP, and SPP are .79, .81, and .85, respectively.

Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (Goodenow, 1993)

Goodenow (1993) developed this scale to measure students' perceived sense of belonging to school. The feeling of rejection subscale from this Scale was utilized in this study. This subscale consists of five items, rated on a five-point Likert scale. Across different samples, Cronbach's alpha for this scale has demonstrated internal consistency values ranging from .77 to .88 (Goodenow, 1993). All five items in the feelings of rejection subscale are negatively worded, meaning that higher scores indicate a stronger sense of rejection. In the present study, the reliability coefficient for this scale was found to be .87.

Student Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (SSWQ) (Renshaw, 2015)

This is a 16-item self-report behavioral rating scale designed to assess school-specific aspects of student well-being. It captures two domains of school-specific private well-being behavior and one class of public well-being behavior (Renshaw, 2015). School connectedness is defined as "feeling of being cared for by and connected well to others at school," joy of learning as "when engaged in any academic task, one experiences positive emotions and cognitions", educational purpose as "evaluating school and academic tasks as worthful and meaningful," and academic efficacy as "assessing one's (academic) behavior as effectively meeting environmental standards" (Renshaw et al., 2015). Each item is rated on a four-point scale, with the subscales demonstrating Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of .83, .77,.91 and .89 respectively.

Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethical Review Board. All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines and ethical standards. Participants were recruited with institutional approval, and each was informed about the study's purpose and importance. Participants had the right to quit if they chose not to proceed. Nevertheless, they were encouraged to take part fully, voluntarily, and actively in the study. Furthermore, explicit permission was obtained from the authors to use scales for measuring the relevant constructs. Participants were given a booklet containing questionnaires -to measure feelings of rejection, subjective well-being, and perfectionism, respectively. Respondents received verbal instructions in addition to written guidelines for completing the questionnaires. The participants were thanked for their input.

Ethical Considerations

- The research ethical review board reviewed and approved the study.
- Before data collection, the study's purpose and importance were communicated to participants. They were informed that their answers would remain confidential and anonymous and they would be used exclusively for research purposes.
- Participants had the right to quit if they chose not to proceed.

Results

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha reliability were calculated to evaluate data normality and scale reliability. A correlation matrix was generated to examine relationships among the variables. Regression analysis assessed the impact of perfectionism and feelings of rejection on subjective well-being in university students, while a t-test evaluated gender differences across variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyze the data (SPSS 20.00).

Table 1

Correlation of Perfectionism, Feeling of Rejection, and Students Subjective well-being (N = 320)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-oriented Perfectionism	57.23	6.82	-							.
2. Other-oriented Perfectionism	62.87	5.45	.23**	-						
3. Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	61.09	5.97	.24**	.34*	-					
4. Feeling of Rejection	16.75	2.30	-.28*	-.38*	.41*	-				
5. Joy of Learning	10.23	2.91	.35**	.11	.55**	-.27**	-			
6. School Connectedness	10.97	2.37	.24**	.13	.09	-.39**	.58**	-		
7. Educational Purpose	10.57	2.18	.35**	.08	.65**	-.45**	.64**	.51**	-	
8. Academic Efficacy	11.20	1.98	34**	.10	.38**	-.59**	.66**	.49**	.63**	-

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

        Table 1 presents the findings from the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. The results indicated that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism were negatively related to feelings of rejection, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism showed a positive correlation with feelings of rejection. Furthermore, self-oriented perfectionism demonstrated positive association with joy of learning, school connectedness, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. Socially prescribed perfectionism showed positive relationships with joy of learning, educational purpose and, academic efficacy. Lastly, feelings of rejection were negatively associated with educational purpose, school connectedness, joy of learning, and academic efficacy.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Showing Perfectionism and Feeling of Rejection as the Predictor of Joy of Learning among University Students (N = 320)

Predictors	Estimate	*SE*	95% *CI* LL	95% *CI* UL	*p*
Constant	1.20	.12	9.19	2.43	.061
Self-Oriented Perfectionism	.31*	.08	.14	.07	.040
Other-Oriented Perfectionism	.06	.01	.06	-.04	.062
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	.08	.02	.09	-.01	.100
Feelings of Rejection	-.27**	.09	-.08	-.29	.002

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 2 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis in which dimensions of perfectionism and feeling of rejection were entered as predictors of joy of learning among university students. The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .18$, $F(2, 318) = 17.18$, $p < .001$, indicating that 18 % variance in joy of learning was explained by the predictor variables. Specifically, self-oriented perfectionism positively predicted joy of learning, whereas feeling of rejection significantly predicted lower joy of learning.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Showing Perfectionism and Feeling of Rejection as the Predictor of School Connectedness among University Students (N = 320)

Predictors	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Constant	1.90**	.80	10.18	.51	.003
Self-Oriented Perfectionism	.20***	.06	.04	.24	.001
Other-Oriented Perfectionism	.07	.01	.12	-.03	.066
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	.04	.02	.12	-.05	.105
Feeling of Rejection	-.17**	.05	-.06	-.24	.002

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 3 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis in which dimensions of perfectionism and feelings of rejection were entered as predictors of school connectedness among university students. The model was significant, $R^2 = .09$, $F(2, 318) = 8.07$, $p < .001$, indicating that 9% of the variance in school connectedness was explained by the predictors. Among these, self-oriented perfectionism positively predicts school connectedness, whereas feelings of rejection significantly predict lower school connectedness.

Table 4

Multiple Regression showing Perfectionism and Feeling of Rejection as the Predictor of Educational Purpose among University Students (N = 320)

Predictors	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Constant	1.89**	.40	8.76	2.47	.002
Self-Oriented Perfectionism	.32**	.06	.06	.35	.003
Other-Oriented Perfectionism	.02	.001	.04	-.05,	.100
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	.09	.03	.09	-.07	.122
Feeling of Rejection	-.14**	.04	-.02	-.14	.015

**$p < .01$, ***$p = .001$.

Table 4 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis in which dimensions of perfectionism and feelings of rejection were entered as predictors of educational purpose among university students. The model was significant, $R^2 = .15$, $F(2, 318) = 13.36$, $p < .001$ indicating that 15% variance in educational purpose can be accounted for by predictors. Among these, self-oriented perfectionism emerged as a positive significant predictor, whereas feeling of rejection significantly predicted lower educational purpose.

Table 5

Multiple Regression showing Perfectionism and Feeling of Rejection as the Predictor of Academic Efficacy among University Students (N = 320)

Predictors	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Constant	1.89	.90	8.60	2.07	.061
Self-Oriented Perfectionism	.30***	.06	.06	.35	.001
Other-Oriented Perfectionism	-.01	.001	.05	-.05	.103
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	.12**	.02	.12	.05	.003
Feeling of Rejection	-.17**	.04	-.05	-.17	.012

**p* < .01. ****p* = .001.

Table 5 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis in which dimensions of perfectionism and feeling of rejection were entered as predictors of academic efficacy among university students. The overall model was significant, R^2 = .16, F (2, 318) = 14.53, p < .001, indicating that 16% variance in academic efficacy was explained by the predictor variables. Specifically, self-oriented perfectionism and social-prescribed perfectionism were significant positive predictors, whereas feelings of rejection emerged as a negative predictor.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between dimensions of perfectionism, feelings of rejection, and subjective well-being. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991), perfectionism can be better understood by examining three distinct dimensions: self-directed perfectionism, perfectionism directed towards others, and perfectionism based on external societal expectations. While, numerous studies have highlighted the potentially destructive effects on academic motivation and achievement levels, the current study's aim is to emphasize the adaptive aspects of perfectionism. At present, while there are several issues that need to be explored related to the role of perfectionism, this study aims to explore the relationship between dimensions of perfectionism, feelings of rejection, and subjective well-being.

The results of this study suggest that different dimensions of perfectionism are positively associated with subjective well-being and negatively associated with feelings of rejection, although the strength of this relationship varies across each specific dimension of perfectionism. In particular, socially-prescribed perfectionism was found to be positively related to feelings of rejection, which in turn was negatively related to subjective well-being. Anwar and Sitwat (2022) conducted a study involving students studying in Lahore-based universities and indicated a positive relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress. This supports the findings that socially-prescribed perfectionism may contribute to negative outcomes such as feelings of rejection and decreased subjective well-being.

The results indicated that self-oriented perfectionism consistently emerged as a significant predictor of all domains of subjective well-being. It showed that students with high levels of self-oriented perfectionism are likely to experience more joy of learning.

Previous research also showed that individuals with self-oriented perfectionism often exhibit elevated levels of assertiveness and engagement in activities, striving to achieve high self-standards (Flett et al., 1991; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). So, in an educational context, self-oriented perfectionists can experience greater joy from learning. On the other hand, other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism were not significant predictors of joy of learning in the current study. Hewitt and Flett (1991, 2004) also indicated that other-oriented perfectionists wanted others to be perfect and they were highly critical of those who were not able to meet their expectations. Therefore, their perfectionistic tendencies were more focused on others rather than on academic learning.

The findings of the current study showed that self-oriented perfectionism is also a significant positive predictor of school connectedness. Self-oriented perfectionists are highly driven to achieve personal goals and maintain high standards, therefore, it was likely that students having characteristics of self-oriented perfectionism showed a greater level of school connectedness. In addition, the present study also explored the relationship of dimensions of perfectionism with educational purpose and academic efficacy. The results indicated that self-oriented perfectionism positively predicted educational purpose and academic efficacy. These findings are consistent with previous research which shows that self-oriented perfectionists tend to have a greater tendency to seek higher grades (Blankstein & Winkworth, 2004), pursue better exam performance (Witcher et al., 2007) and strive for academic success (Miquelon et al., 2005). Socially-prescribed perfectionism emerged as a significant positive predictor of academic efficacy only. Socially-prescribed perfectionists are motivated to attain high grades to fulfil others' expectations of them, therefore, they might experience academic efficacy but may find it difficult to formulate educational purpose. On the other hand, other-oriented perfectionism was not a significant predictor of educational purpose and academic efficacy. The present study indicated that self-oriented perfectionism may be conceptualized as an adaptive dimension of perfectionism.

The objective of the current study was also to investigate the relationship between feelings of rejection and subjective well-being including joy of learning, school connectedness, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. It was found that feelings of rejection showed a negative relationship with joy of learning, school connectedness, educational purpose, and academic efficacy. According to DeWall (2011), feelings of rejection are not only the cause of anger arousal, aggression, anxiety, and depressive symptoms but also diminish performance on difficult intellectual tasks (as cited in Weir, 2012). It was also found that low academic achievement is the consequence of a sense of rejection (Sari, 2013). Furthermore, Kamran and Alam (2023) analyzed the role of self-efficacy and perfectionism in predicting academic procrastination in a sample of university students in Pakistan. Their study suggests that perfectionistic tendencies may suppress students' academic progress and cause feelings of rejection and decreased subjective well-being.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the current study was conducted to examine the role of perfectionism and feelings of rejection in predicting subjective well-being among university students. The findings suggest that students who perceive themselves as being rejected or excluded in the

school/university environment may be more susceptible to negative outcomes. While perfectionism is often associated with psychological or emotional problems, the current study emphasized on both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions. Rather than perfectionism being solely a risk factor, it may also serve to encourage striving for excellence and redirect one's energy into growth and well-being. The present study revealed that self-oriented perfectionism might work as an adaptive dimension supporting educational purpose, school connectedness, joy of learning, and academic efficacy.

Limitations and Recommendations

For future studies, it is recommended that information should also be collected by utilizing qualitative methods to find in-depth causes. To enhance generalizability, the sample must be comprised of students from other regions of the country and a probability sampling technique should be used. Future research should further investigate the contextual factors shaping these relationships and examine additional variables that may influence the complex dynamic between perfectionism and feelings of rejection. It is also recommended to study the moderating effect of perfectionism on the relationship between feelings of rejection and subjective well-being. Moreover, the effect of perfectionism on subjective well-being should also be measured by utilizing Frost multidimensional perfectionism scale (Frost et al., 1990) suggesting two broad dimensions that are adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism.

Implications

The current study not only expands theoretical understanding but also offers implications for future research and development of guidance and counseling services. It is important for practitioners, counselors and educators to consider social expectations that are encountered by students in their daily lives. Guidance and counseling practices should be used to support students in the clarification of personal and social expectations. Students must be equipped with coping skills to overcome their feelings of rejection or isolation. Moreover, teachers should not only be aware of the detrimental effects of students' feelings of rejection on their academic performance but also actively motivate them to pursue their goals with full zeal. There is a need to train students regarding the adaptive dimension of perfectionism and teach them effective problem-solving skills to prevent them from adopting socially prescribed perfectionism.

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