

Cognitive and Social Influences on Faith and Belief Formation among Baptist Pastors in the Lagos East Baptist Conference, Nigeria

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This study examines the cognitive and social determinants of belief strength among Baptist pastors within the Lagos East Baptist Conference, Nigeria. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. In the first phase, a cross-sectional survey of 120 pastors was conducted using standardised measures of religious commitment, cognitive reflection, social influence, and religious socialisation. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression techniques. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected participants to further explain and contextualise the quantitative findings through thematic analysis. The quantitative results indicated a statistically significant regression model, $F(4, 115) = 18.72, p < .001$, accounting for 39% of the variance in belief strength ($R^2 = .39$). Social influence emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), followed by religious socialisation ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) and cognitive reflection ($\beta = .19, p < .01$). Qualitative findings highlighted mentorship, communal validation, and reflective meaning-making as key mechanisms sustaining belief systems. The study concludes that belief formation among clergy is a multidimensional process shaped by the interplay of reflective cognition and sustained social reinforcement. It further demonstrates that belief strength is analytically distinct from behavioural religious commitment and underscores the importance of culturally embedded, relational contexts in shaping pastoral faith. These findings extend the psychology of religion into a non-Western clerical context and emphasise the need for contextually grounded theoretical models.

Keywords: belief strength, clergy psychology, cognitive reflection, Nigeria, religious commitment, social influence

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INTRODUCTION

Religious belief formation occupies a central place within the psychology of religion, encompassing the cognitive, emotional, and social processes through which individuals construct, sustain, and transmit systems of meaning. Contemporary psychological scholarship increasingly conceptualises faith not merely as doctrinal assent but as a dynamic psychological phenomenon shaped by information processing, reflective reasoning, and social context (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). For clergy, belief formation carries particular psychological significance, as personal convictions are closely intertwined with vocational identity, leadership responsibilities, and ongoing social evaluation.

Cognitive approaches emphasise individual differences in reasoning styles and meaning-making processes. Dual-process theories distinguish between intuitive, automatic cognition and reflective, analytical reasoning, both of which contribute to the endorsement and maintenance of religious beliefs (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). Reflective cognition may serve not only to evaluate belief content but also to integrate doubt, ambiguity, and lived experience into coherent systems of belief.

Social psychological perspectives complement cognitive accounts by foregrounding the role of interpersonal influence and communal reinforcement. Social learning theory posits that beliefs are acquired and stabilised through observation, modelling, and reinforcement within social environments (Bandura, 1977). Within religious settings, clergy are embedded in networks of mentorship, peer interaction, denominational structures, and congregational feedback, all of which exert sustained influence on belief commitment.

Despite a substantial body of literature, most empirical studies on religious belief formation are based on Western samples, thereby limiting the cross-cultural applicability of prevailing psychological models. In sub-Saharan Africa, religious life is deeply communal, and clergy operate within dense relational and institutional networks. Nigerian scholarship highlights the ways in which pastoral authority, communal expectations, and denominational culture shape religious identity and commitment (Adeyemo, 2006; Ojo, 2008).

The Lagos East Baptist Conference provides a particularly salient context for examining these dynamics. Studies of church leadership and membership retention within the Conference underscore the importance of mentorship, collective participation, and social cohesion in sustaining religious commitment (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 2013). These features suggest that belief formation among pastors is likely to be shaped by social reinforcement operating alongside individual cognitive processes.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the cognitive and social determinants of belief formation among Baptist pastors in the Lagos East Baptist Conference. In line with the empirical orientation of the *North American Journal of Psychology*, the study integrates quantitative psychological measures with qualitative analysis to advance a culturally informed understanding of belief formation processes.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF VARIABLES

Operational Definition of Key Constructs

To ensure conceptual clarity and analytical precision, the study distinguishes between the following constructs:

Religious Commitment. Religious commitment refers to the degree of personal devotion and behavioural engagement in religious practices, including prayer, worship attendance, and adherence to doctrinal

expectations. It reflects the extent to which religion shapes daily living and decision-making. In this study, religious commitment is conceptualised as behavioural and participatory, capturing observable expressions of faith.

Belief Strength. Belief strength is defined as the intensity, certainty, and cognitive conviction with which religious beliefs are held, regardless of behavioural expression. While related to religious commitment, belief strength is analytically distinct:

Religious commitment → *what individuals do (practice-oriented)*

Belief strength → *what individuals are convinced of (cognitive certainty)*

Thus, a participant may demonstrate high belief strength (strong doctrinal conviction) but vary in behavioural commitment, or vice versa.

Belief strength was operationalised using Likert-scale items assessing certainty, confidence in doctrine, and resistance to doubt.

Cognitive Reflection. Cognitive reflection refers to the tendency to override intuitive responses and engage in deliberate analytical thinking (Frederick, 2005). It measures reflective reasoning rather than religious disposition.

Social Influence. Social influence denotes the extent to which individuals' beliefs and behaviours are shaped by external social pressures, including peers, denominational expectations, and congregational norms.

Religious Socialisation. Religious socialisation refers to the process through which individuals acquire religious beliefs, values, and practices through family, church, and institutional exposure over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Commitment and Belief Formation

Religious commitment has long been recognised as a central construct in the study of religiosity, particularly in relation to behavioural engagement and identity formation. It reflects the degree to which individuals adhere to religious practices and integrate faith into daily living (Worthington et al., 2003). However, recent scholarship has increasingly distinguished between external religious participation and internalised belief conviction, arguing that observable commitment does not always equate to deep cognitive assent (Barclay, 2015; N. T. Wright, 2013).

Within the Nigerian context, studies have highlighted the social visibility of religion and the strong cultural expectation of religious participation, particularly within Christian communities (Adogame, 2022). This environment can produce high levels of religious commitment that are socially reinforced, yet vary in terms of personal conviction. Consequently, it becomes necessary to distinguish between religious commitment (behavioural engagement) and belief strength (cognitive certainty and conviction).

Cognitive Reflection and Religious Reasoning

The relationship between cognitive reflection and religiosity remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Early work by Frederick (2005) introduced the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) as a measure of the ability to override intuitive responses in favour of analytical reasoning. Subsequent studies have explored how reflective thinking interacts with religious belief systems.

While some scholars suggest that analytical thinking may reduce intuitive religiosity, more recent research indicates that this relationship is context-dependent (Pennycook et al., 2016). In African contexts, particularly within Nigeria, the relationship between cognitive reflection and religious belief appears to assume a more contextually nuanced

character. Rather than diminishing faith commitments, higher levels of cognitive engagement may, in fact, contribute to a more systematic articulation of theological positions and greater doctrinal coherence, especially among formally trained clergy.

This perspective is supported by emerging indigenous scholarship, which suggests that reflective reasoning operates not as a secularising force but as a tool for deepening interpretative engagement with sacred texts and traditions (Dairo, 1995; Alabi, 2020). Consequently, cognitive reflection within such settings may reinforce, rather than erode, religious conviction, aligning intellectual inquiry with faith-based epistemologies (Ojo, 2023; Adedibu, 2018). Thus, among pastors, cognitive reflection is better understood not as a threat to belief but as a tool for theological reasoning and interpretive depth.

Social Influence and Religious Socialisation

Religious belief formation is deeply embedded in social contexts. Social influence refers to the extent to which individuals' beliefs and practices are shaped by external pressures, including community expectations, leadership authority, and peer networks (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

In Nigeria, religion operates within collectivist social structures, where identity is often negotiated within family, church, and community frameworks (Adogame, 2022). Empirical studies have shown that pastoral authority and denominational structures significantly shape doctrinal beliefs and moral practices (Ojo, 2023; Ukah, 2020).

Religious socialisation further extends this process by emphasising the long-term formation of beliefs through early exposure, family upbringing, and institutional reinforcement (King & Boyatzis, 2015). In contemporary Nigerian Christianity, this process is reinforced not only through traditional structures but also through emerging digital and media platforms (Campbell, 2020).

Religion and Psychosocial Outcomes

Recent studies have also examined the functional role of religion in shaping psychosocial outcomes. Religious engagement has been associated with emotional resilience, social support, and coping mechanisms, particularly in contexts marked by socio-economic challenges (Koenig, 2012).

In Nigeria, religion often serves as a primary framework for meaning-making, influencing responses to life challenges and moral decision-making (Adogame, 2022). However, scholars caution that strong religious environments may also foster conformity pressures, where beliefs are maintained more through social expectation than personal conviction (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Contemporary Shifts in Nigerian Christianity

The Nigerian religious landscape is undergoing significant transformation, shaped by globalisation, digital media, and theological diversification. The rise of digital ministry and online religious engagement has expanded the channels through which beliefs are formed and reinforced (Campbell, 2020).

Recent scholarship also highlights increasing pluralism and critical engagement with religious beliefs, even within highly religious societies (Pew Research Center, 2023; Tijani, et al., 2026). These developments suggest that belief systems are becoming more reflective, negotiated, and dynamic, rather than purely inherited.

METHOD

Synthesis and Research Gap

Despite extensive research on religiosity, several gaps remain:
 Limited distinction between religious commitment and belief strength
 Insufficient integration of cognitive reflection with religious variables
 Lack of mixed-methods studies focusing on clergy populations in Nigeria
 This study addresses these gaps by providing a multi-variable, mixed-methods analysis that integrates behavioural, cognitive, and social dimensions of religious belief among Baptist pastors.

Research Design

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data from 120 respondents were first analysed, followed by a qualitative phase designed to explain and contextualise the statistical findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The design was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to identify statistical relationships among variables (e.g., religious commitment, belief strength, cognitive reflection, and social influence) but also to gain deeper insight into the underlying meanings, motivations, and contextual dynamics influencing these relationships among Baptist pastors.

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 120 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 80%. This sample size is consistent with the regression model reported, $F(4, 115)$, indicating 120 valid cases after accounting for predictors. The sample size of 120 is considered adequate for regression analysis involving four predictors, satisfying established statistical guidelines for minimum case-to-variable ratios (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

From the quantitative sample, a purposive qualitative subsample of 15 participants was selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria for the qualitative phase emphasised variation in age, ministerial experience, and theological training to ensure diversity of perspectives.

Demographic Characteristics

Participants represented a range of demographic and ministerial backgrounds:

Age Distribution - Participants ranged from approximately 30 to 65 years, with the majority clustered within the 40–55 years category, reflecting mid-career pastoral leadership.

Years of Ministry Experience - Ministry experience ranged from 5 to over 30 years, with a mean estimated range of 12–18 years, indicating substantial pastoral exposure.

Theological Training - Participants were categorised into the following Diploma in Theology; Bachelor's degree (Theology/Religious Studies); and Postgraduate theological qualifications (M.Div., M.A., PhD). This distribution reflects the structured ministerial training typical of Baptist denominational systems in Nigeria.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	30–39	35	42
	40–49	56	67.2
	50–59	18	21.6
	60+	11	13.2
Years of Ministry Experience	1–10	36	43.2
	11–20	58	69.6
	21+	26	31.2
Theological Training	Diploma in Theology	18	21.6
	Bachelor's degree (Theology/Religious Studies);	36	43.2
	Postgraduate theological qualifications (M.Div., M.A., PhD).	66	79.2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and internal consistency, the study applied the following criteria:

Inclusion Criteria - Ordained or licensed Baptist pastors; Currently serving within the Lagos East Baptist Conference; Minimum of two years of active pastoral ministry and Willingness to participate voluntarily.

Exclusion Criteria - Non-pastoral church staff or lay leaders; Pastors outside the Conference jurisdiction; Incomplete questionnaire responses; Participants who declined interview follow-up (for qualitative phase)

Recruitment Method

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to include (i) Formal permission was obtained from Conference leadership (ii) Invitations were distributed during pastors' meetings and via denominational communication channels (iii) Questionnaires were administered both physically and electronically.

For the qualitative phase, participants were purposefully selected based on their survey responses and availability for in-depth engagement.

Response Rate

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 120 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 80%. This high response rate reflects strong institutional engagement and the professional commitment of participants within the Conference.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in strict adherence to established ethical standards governing research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all prospective respondents were provided with comprehensive information regarding the purpose, procedures, and potential implications of the study prior to their involvement. Informed consent was duly obtained from each participant before the commencement of data collection, thereby ensuring that participation was based on a clear understanding and free will.

In order to safeguard the rights and welfare of participants, rigorous measures were implemented to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity. No personally identifiable information was recorded or disclosed at any stage of the research process, and all data were handled with a high degree of discretion. The information obtained was used solely for academic purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorised access.

Furthermore, formal ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Redeemer's University Ethics Committee (Reference No.: RUN/REC/2026/173), in accordance with institutional research governance frameworks. The research was conducted in full compliance with the ethical guidelines stipulated by the approving body, including provisions relating to responsible data management, transparency in research conduct, and respect for participants' autonomy and dignity.

Instrumentation Overview

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising validated scales adapted for the Nigerian Baptist pastoral context.

Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10). The Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al., 2003) was used to assess religious commitment.

Structure: 10 items

Scale: 5-point Likert (1 = Not at all true of me; 5 = Totally true of me)

Dimensions: Intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment

Sample Item: "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life."

Scoring: Scores were summed, with higher scores indicating stronger religious commitment.

Reliability (Current Study): Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating high internal consistency.

Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT). The Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005) was used to measure analytical thinking.

Structure: 3–7 items (adapted version)

Format: Open-ended numerical responses.

Sample Item:

"A bat and a ball cost ₦1,100 in total. The bat costs ₦1,000 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?"

Scoring: Responses were scored as correct (1) or incorrect (0), with total scores reflecting level of cognitive reflection.

Reliability (Current Study): KR-20 = 0.72, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Social Influence Scale. A modified Social Influence Scale was used to measure perceived external influence on beliefs.

Structure: 8 items

Scale: 5-point Likert

Sample Item: "My beliefs are influenced by respected leaders in my denomination."

Scoring: Higher scores indicate greater susceptibility to social influence.

Reliability (Current Study): Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$

Belief Strength Scale (Adapted Measure). Belief strength was measured using a researcher-developed scale adapted from existing religiosity frameworks.

Structure: 6 items

Scale: 5-point Likert

Sample Items: "I am certain about the truth of my religious beliefs." "I rarely question my core doctrinal convictions."

Scoring: Items were summed to produce a composite score; higher scores indicate stronger belief conviction.

Reliability (Current Study): Cronbach's alpha = 0.84

Religious Socialisation Scale. This construct was measured using items adapted from prior studies on religious upbringing.

Structure: 7 items

Scale: 5-point Likert

Sample Item: "I was raised in a home where religious practices were consistently observed."

Reliability (Current Study): Cronbach's alpha = 0.79

All instruments were contextually adapted to reflect the Nigerian Baptist pastoral environment and the adaptation Process considered the following: Language simplified for clarity without altering meaning; Items reviewed by three theological experts; Pilot-tested with 15 pastors outside the study sample; Minor revisions made based on feedback. Although originally developed in Western contexts, these instruments demonstrated acceptable psychometric performance within this sample, supporting their contextual applicability.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 2. Participants reported generally high levels of religious commitment ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$) and belief strength ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.52$), indicating strong doctrinal conviction and active engagement in religious practices. Religious socialisation also recorded a relatively high mean ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.60$), suggesting substantial formative exposure to religious teachings and environments.

In contrast, cognitive reflection scores were comparatively lower ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.91$), indicating moderate levels of analytical reasoning among participants. Social influence demonstrated a moderate-to-high mean ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.64$), reflecting the notable role of external social factors in shaping belief systems.

Additionally, participants reported high overall religious commitment ($M = 37.82$, $SD = 4.91$) and moderate cognitive reflection ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.74$) based on scale totals, while perceived social influence remained high ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$).

Regression Results

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using 120 valid cases to examine the predictive influence of cognitive reflection, social influence, religious socialisation, and religious commitment on belief strength. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 115) = 18.72$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors jointly explained a significant proportion of variance in belief strength.

The model accounted for 39% of the variance ($R^2 = .39$), demonstrating substantial explanatory power. Among the predictors, social influence emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), followed by religious socialisation ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) and cognitive reflection ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$).

Correlation analysis further revealed that belief strength was positively associated with cognitive reflection ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and social influence ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), indicating that both analytical engagement and social context contribute significantly to belief formation.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 120)*

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Religious Commitment	4.12	0.58	2.80	5.00
Cognitive Reflection	1.84	0.91	0.00	3.00
Social Influence	3.67	0.64	2.10	4.90
Belief Strength	4.25	0.52	3.00	5.00
Religious Socialisation	3.89	0.60	2.50	5.00

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all study variables, including religious commitment, cognitive reflection, social influence, belief strength, and religious socialisation. The results indicate generally high levels of religious commitment ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$) and belief strength ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.52$) among participants, suggesting strong doctrinal conviction and active religious engagement. Religious socialisation also recorded a relatively high mean ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.60$), reflecting substantial formative religious exposure. Cognitive reflection scores were comparatively lower ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.91$), indicating moderate levels of analytical reasoning within the sample. Social influence showed a moderate-to-high mean ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.64$), suggesting that external factors play a notable role in shaping beliefs. Three themes emerged: mentorship and modelling, communal validation, and reflective meaning-making. Participants consistently described senior pastors and denominational leaders as influential role models. Congregational affirmation reinforced belief certainty, particularly during periods of doubt. Reflective practices facilitated integration of challenges into stable belief systems.

Qualitative Themes

The qualitative subsample was drawn from the quantitative participants to ensure integration between both strands of the study. Qualitative findings were used to explain and contextualise the statistical results, particularly the observed relationships between belief strength, social influence, and religious socialisation.

Three major themes emerged from the analysis:

- i. **Mentorship and Modelling:** Participants consistently identified senior pastors and denominational leaders as key influencers whose teachings and personal examples shaped their beliefs and commitment.
- ii. **Communal Validation:** Congregational support and affirmation reinforced belief certainty, especially during periods of doubt or theological questioning. Social belonging played a critical role in sustaining faith commitments.
- iii. **Reflective Meaning-Making:** Participants described engaging in reflective practices that enabled them to process challenges and integrate them into stable belief systems. This finding aligns with the role of cognitive reflection observed in the quantitative results.

Overall, the qualitative data provided deeper insight into how social and cognitive factors interact in shaping belief strength, thereby complementing the regression findings.

DISCUSSION

The findings support psychological models that conceptualise belief formation as an interaction between cognitive processing and social context. Cognitive reflection was positively associated with belief strength, suggesting that analytical reasoning supports belief integration rather than erosion. Social influence emerged as the most robust predictor, highlighting the importance of communal reinforcement in pastoral belief formation.

These results align with Nigerian scholarship emphasising mentorship, communal cohesion, and institutional belonging in sustaining pastoral commitment (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 2013; Ojo, 2008). From a cross-cultural perspective, the findings challenge individualistic assumptions prevalent in Western psychology and underscore the need for culturally sensitive models of religious belief formation.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative designs across denominations and cultural contexts.

Findings from both strands were merged during interpretation, allowing: Convergence (agreement between data types); Complementarity (different but reinforcing insights) and Expansion (broader understanding beyond statistics). The explanatory sequential design was selected because quantitative analysis alone could not capture depth of religious experience.

Qualitative data provided interpretive richness and contextual grounding. The design enhanced validity through triangulation.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the cognitive and social determinants of belief strength among Baptist pastors within the Lagos East Baptist Conference, Nigeria, using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The findings demonstrate that belief formation among clergy is neither purely cognitive nor solely behavioural, but rather a multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction of reflective reasoning and socially embedded religious experience.

The quantitative analysis revealed that social influence and religious socialisation are significant predictors of belief strength, underscoring the enduring role of communal structures, denominational identity, and formative religious environments in shaping doctrinal conviction. Cognitive reflection also emerged as a meaningful, though comparatively moderate, predictor, suggesting that analytical reasoning contributes to the consolidation and articulation of belief rather than its erosion.

Qualitative insights further illuminated these relationships by identifying mentorship, communal validation, and theological training as key mechanisms through which beliefs are reinforced and sustained. Importantly, the study establishes that belief strength is analytically distinct from religious commitment, thereby challenging assumptions that behavioural religiosity necessarily reflects depth of conviction.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on religion in non-Western contexts by demonstrating that belief systems among clergy are deeply contextual, relational, and cognitively mediated. The study thus advances a more nuanced understanding of pastoral religiosity within contemporary Nigerian Christianity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, several recommendations are proposed for practice, research, and policy.

Practical and Ecclesial Implications

Church leadership structures should place greater emphasis on intentional theological formation and reflective engagement, rather than relying solely on behavioural indicators of religiosity. Pastoral training institutions may benefit from incorporating critical thinking and doctrinal reflection modules to strengthen the cognitive foundations of belief among clergy.

Furthermore, denominational bodies should recognise the influential role of mentorship and communal reinforcement in shaping belief systems, and therefore invest in structured mentoring programmes that promote both theological depth and spiritual maturity.

Implications for Theological Education

The findings suggest the need for a more integrated model of ministerial formation that balances doctrinal instruction, reflective reasoning, and contextual awareness. Seminaries and theological colleges should foster environments that encourage dialogical learning and critical engagement with faith, particularly in a rapidly changing religious landscape.

Policy and Institutional Considerations

Religious organisations and policy stakeholders should acknowledge the broader social dimensions of belief formation, particularly in collectivist contexts. Programmes aimed at strengthening religious leadership should therefore incorporate community-based approaches that reinforce positive social influence while encouraging individual conviction.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should expand this line of inquiry by:

Employing larger and more diverse samples across different denominations and regions; Incorporating longitudinal designs to examine changes in belief formation over time; Exploring additional variables such as digital religious engagement, socio-economic factors, and intergenerational dynamics and Further refining the measurement of belief strength to enhance conceptual clarity and cross-cultural validity

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