

## Research on the Impact of E-commerce Hosts' Capabilities on Consumer Perceived Trust Based on fsQCA

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to investigate the impact of e-commerce hosts' capabilities on consumers perceived trust. It takes the professional capabilities, interactive capabilities, and language expression capabilities of e-commerce hosts as independent variables and consumers perceived trust as the dependent variable to explore the role of the dimensions of e-commerce hosts' capabilities. Based on the data from 352 valid questionnaires, reliability and validity tests, variable assignment, and calibration were conducted as preprocessing steps. The fsQCA method was used for empirical analysis to identify the complex causal relationships of sufficiency and necessity among variables. The results show that three configurations triggering high consumer perceived trust and one configuration triggering low consumer perceived trust. Practice implications are also drawn based on the empirical analysis results.

*Keywords:* E-commerce host capabilities, consumer perceived trust, fsQCA.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, live-streaming e-commerce has become an important business model in the field of e-commerce. In this business model, hosts, as the key link connecting consumers and products, play a vital role in building consumer trust. Their personal capabilities are decisive in the construction of consumer trust (Liu *et al.* 2022). Existing research shows that professional capability (such as product knowledge), interactive capability (such as immediate feedback), and language expression capability (such as vivid description) are the three major key dimensions that affect consumer decision-making (Zou & Fu, 2024). Some scholars believe that the establishment of consumer trust is crucial in e-commerce transactions and is even the decisive factor in the success of e-commerce transactions (Holsapple & Sasidharan, 2005). It is particularly worth noting that consumer decisions in live-streaming shopping are often highly emotionally driven, which makes trust the core mechanism for making transactions. Trust is an essential factor that affects consumers' live streaming shopping (Dai & Cui, 2022).

However, through a review of the literature, it is found that the current research on consumer trust mainly employs statistical analysis methods, such as structural equation model (SEM). It constructs measurement and structural models to analyze the complex relationships between variables. Its advantage is that it can handle and analyze multiple independent and dependent variables simultaneously (Wang, Wen & Li, 2022). This method can be employed to understand the distinct impacts of individual influential factors on consumer behavior. For instance, the studies by Li and Li (2022) demonstrate that interactivity, entertainment value, reputation, and sense of responsibility have a significantly positive effect on perceived trust. Attractiveness, affability, professionalism, and interactivity have a significantly positive impact on consumer trust (Wang *et al.*, 2021). These studies reflect the linear influence of individual factors on perceived trust. Although this method can quantify the relationship between influential factors and outcomes, it is incapable of conducting an in-depth analysis of the impact of combinations of factors on outcomes (Liu *et al.*, 2017).

In recent years, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) has been increasingly applied in the academic community. Based on set theory and configurational theory, this method posits that the impact of conditions on outcomes is not independent, and the relationship between conditions and outcomes is asymmetric. It can examine the combinations of conditions and their influence on complex social phenomena. Using fuzzy calibration, this method calibrates the set membership of variable data to analyze the subset relationships between the sets of condition variables and outcome variables (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). Some scholars have pointed out that fsQCA can analyze the combination of different influential factors and their impact on user behavior, which helps to better understand the internal mechanisms of each element (Woodside, 2014). In the field of user behavior research, Li *et al.* (2018) found that the combination of seven paths of hedonic value (pleasure), informational value (information recording and sharing), media value (media

attractiveness), and social value (social interaction) significantly affects the behavior of social media users. Pappas *et al.* (2016) applied fsQCA to analyze experienced online shoppers and found that nine combinations of different dimensions cognitive of perception and emotional perception can explain their consumer behavior.

Su Fu's (2023) research indicates that in live-streaming e-commerce, trust formation typically requires a specific combination of multiple conditions, which is where the QCA method excels. Ren and Zhu (2023) used fsQCA to conduct a configurational analysis of host characteristics in five areas: attractiveness, professionalism, interactivity, credibility, and affability, to explore how these characteristics of e-commerce hosts influence consumer behavior.

Based on the above, this study aims to address the following core questions: 1. Combination Path: Are there multiple equivalent configuration paths (equifinality) of e-commerce hosts' professional, interactive, and language expression capabilities that can lead to high consumer perceived trust? For example, can "professional capability + interactive capability" and "professional capability + language expression capability" achieve the same trust effect? 2. Necessity and Asymmetry: Which capability dimensions are necessary for consumer trust (without which trust cannot form)? This study will use fsQCA to transcend traditional linear thinking and explore how host capabilities affect consumer trust in live-streaming e-commerce. It will reveal the impact mechanisms of different capability combinations on consumer perceived trust. The research will systematically uncover the combined effects of hosts' multi-dimensional capabilities, enriching the theory of consumer perceived trust formation in live-streaming e-commerce. By using NCA to quantify the "bottleneck effect" of each capability dimension, it will offer a new perspective on the boundary conditions of trust formation and provide references for host capability training in live-streaming sales enterprises.

### **RELATED RESEARCH ON CONSUMER PERCEIVED TRUST**

Trust is defined as an important element in social media platforms, especially in online shopping activities, to build healthy relationships between all parties, including sellers, buyers, and platforms (Al-Debei *et al.*, 2015). In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, trust is the level of willingness to depend, based on expectations of the host's capability and reliability. According to Wang (2021), perceived trust refers to the degree of honesty and credibility of the host in the process of live-streaming sales, as well as the consumers' trust and identification with the host and the products being recommended. Trust comes from the daily interaction between streamers and viewers, the professional competence of streamers, etc. (Zhang *et al.*, 2021a). Some other scholars have regarded hosts as key opinion leaders to investigate their impact on trust. For example, opinion leaders in e-commerce live streaming positively influence trust (Lakhan *et al.* 2021).

### **CAPABILITIES OF E-COMMERCE HOST**

To enhance consumer perceived trust, e-commerce hosts should have a comprehensive understanding of the products they recommend. This includes being able to provide accurate information about the products, possessing professional knowledge about products in the relevant industry, and having their own unique insights into the products. By doing so, consumers can gain product-related knowledge from the hosts, thereby reducing their cognitive burden.

In the live-streaming room, e-commerce hosts can display products and explain them in detail. They can show consumers the appearance of the products, the methods of use, the process of use, or the experience of use. This allows consumers to understand the products from all angles and reduces their doubts about the products. The information that consumers obtain helps them to evaluate the products (Filiari *et al.*, 2018). E-commerce hosts can also enhance consumers' perceived trust in them by presenting the products in an entertaining manner and interacting with the audience in real-time. In the live-streaming room, the language used by e-commerce hosts should be amiable and easy to understand. They should introduce the products in an appropriate manner, without exaggerating or being ambiguous, so as to enhance the consumers' perceived trust in them.

Therefore, e-commerce hosts should possess the following capabilities: (1) Professional capability. E-commerce hosts should have a good understanding of the products and possess professional product knowledge so that consumers can obtain true and reliable product information. (2) Interactive capability. As the key people for the dissemination and exchange of product information and related industry knowledge, e-commerce hosts need to have strong interpersonal communication skills. They should be able to respond to the audience's comments and questions in a timely manner and enhance the audience's sense of participation and trust through effective interaction. (3) Language expression capability. Language is one of the core tools for live-streaming sales. Hosts should focus on improving their language expression skills during the live-streaming process. By introducing products appropriately, they can establish a good relationship of trust with consumers. Based on the capabilities that e-commerce hosts should have, this paper identifies three core capabilities closely related to e-commerce hosts, namely, professional capability, interactive capability, and language expression capability.

### **The Professional Capability of E-commerce Hosts**

Wei (2022) pointed out that professional knowledge is a key dimension in constructing source credibility. When a host possesses a high level of relevant professional knowledge, consumers tend to consider the information to be more credible and are more willing to follow the host's recommendations (Fang, 2014). Professional hosts, by thoroughly mastering product technical parameters, usage scenarios, and industry trends, can significantly reduce information asymmetry for consumers. Research indicates that there is a positive correlation between the depth of professional knowledge and consumer trust (Huang, Ye & Wang 2023). Professional hosts, through live demonstrations and functional showcases (such as makeup hosts doing color tests or home appliance hosts showing operations), transform abstract descriptions into intuitive experiences, enhancing the credibility of the information. They can quickly identify the core selling points of products (for example, a maternity and infant host interpreting the formula of milk powder) and reduce consumer decision-making costs through structured expression (such as comparative analysis and scenario-based descriptions). Therefore, the professional capability of e-commerce hosts is one of the core factors affecting consumer trust, influencing the consumer trust system through dimensions such as information transmission efficiency, consumer decision-making support, and the depth of emotional connection.

### **The Interaction Capability of E-commerce Hosts**

While demonstrating professional knowledge, hosts integrate signals of interaction activities and emotional management to convey a sense of sincerity. This integration of multidimensional signals is a key area of research in live-streaming trust. The live-streaming room is a highly interactive social space full of vitality and creativity (Liu *et al.* 2024). The interaction and communication between hosts and consumers generate an interactive feedback signal, which can have a strong psychological impact on consumers and increase their trust in the merchant (Chen *et al.* 2024). When hosts can keenly perceive and respond to the implicit needs of the audience, consumers will experience an emotional resonance of "being understood," transforming the host's interaction skills into a trust foundation of "the host cares about me." The "sense of decision-making participation" created by interaction leads consumers to have a cognitive bias of "what I choose is more reliable." For example, when consumers decide the order of color testing through bullet-screen voting, they are more likely to accept the final recommendation. Therefore, the interaction capabilities of E-commerce hosts are the emotional bond that builds consumer trust. Through multidimensional mechanisms such as immediate response, emotional resonance, information transparency, and social presence, it transforms one-way communication into a two-way connection, significantly enhancing consumers' trust perception, and thereby increasing their purchasing intention and brand loyalty.

### **The Language Expression Capability of E-commerce Hosts**

In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, hosts provide vivid and emotional explanations of products. Through online live-streaming, they convey their understanding and actual experiences of the products to consumers, enabling consumers to have a more comprehensive understanding of the products (Zhu & Huang, 2020). In this process, consumers develop trust and recognition of the hosts by perceiving their language and behavior (Wang *et al.* 2021). Language persuasion skills significantly influence cognitive trust (Chen, Luo & Zhou, 2024). When conveying product information to consumers, e-commerce hosts' unique personal styles and language patterns are more conducive to guiding consumers to make purchasing decisions (Wang, 2019). If the hosts' language cannot accurately convey information to the consumer group, it will increase the consumer trust crisis caused by information asymmetry. By using key phrases, such as citing authoritative ranking data to prove product effectiveness, hosts can create a trustworthy and responsible image for themselves, thereby indirectly enhancing consumer trust (Jiang, 2022). The completeness, clarity, and expression methods of the information conveyed through language greatly affect the extent and efficiency with which consumers absorb complete product information (Wang, 2022).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Scale Design**

Based on previous studies, this paper collects data through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three parts: (1) Instructions for the questionnaire, including the basic information of the issuer, the main purpose of the questionnaire, privacy protection, and the requirements for filling out the questionnaire. (2) Basic information of the respondents, including gender, age, income, education, occupation, frequency of e-commerce live-streaming shopping, and the number of years of live-streaming shopping. (3) Variable measurement. This study has three antecedent variables: the professional capability of E-commerce hosts, the interaction capability of E-commerce hosts, and the language expression capability of E-commerce hosts. And one outcome variable: consumer perceived trust. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, this paper draws on mature scales and makes appropriate modifications according to the actual needs of this study. The scale for professional capability (PC) of E-commerce hosts refers to that of Li *et al.* (2021); the scale for interaction capability (IC) of E-commerce hosts mainly refers to those of Ridings (2002), Wang (2021), and Liu (2020); the scale for language expression capability (LEC) of E-commerce hosts mainly refers to that of Jiang (2022); the scale for consumer perceived trust (PT) refers to those of McKnight (2022) and Gao (2024). The measurement of all variables is based on the Likert five-point scale.

### **Data Collection**

Firstly, a pre-survey of the questionnaire was conducted, that is, the initial questionnaire was distributed to 80 respondents. The valid questionnaires were analyzed, and some items were deleted and modified accordingly. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value

of the scale was greater than 0.7, indicating good reliability. Thus, the final questionnaire was formed and the formal survey was carried out. The questionnaire was distributed through a combination of online and offline. Online, the questionnaire was created and distributed via the Credamo platform. To improve the validity and authenticity of the questionnaire, the highest level of quality control and precise targeting control were selected when distributing the questionnaire. Offline, data were collected through paper questionnaires. A total of 352 valid questionnaires were collected in this survey. The statistics obtained from the collected data are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, the majority of the respondents were under 35 years old, with a bachelor's degree or above and monthly income of over 4500 yuan. Most of them often shopped in live-streaming rooms and had more than 2 years of live-streaming shopping experience, which met the requirements of the research in this paper.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Survey Sample

Variable	Category	Sample Size	Percentage
Gender	Male	241	68.47%
	Female	111	31.53%
Age	Under 25	104	29.55%
	26–35	195	55.40%
	36–45	40	11.36%
	Over 45	13	3.69%
Education Level	High school or below	2	0.57%
	Junior college	20	5.68%
	Bachelor's degree	245	69.60%
	Master's degree or above	85	24.15%
Monthly Income	Below 1,500 RMB	22	6.25%
	1,501–3,000 RMB	48	13.64%
	3,001–4,500 RMB	38	10.80%
	4,501–6,000 RMB	67	19.03%
	Over 6,000 RMB	177	50.28%
Frequency of Live Streaming Shopping	Rarely (2–5 times in the past year)	20	5.68%
	Occasionally (6–10 times in the past year)	112	31.82%
	Frequently (Over 10 times in the past year)	220	62.50%
Experience with Live Streaming Shopping	Within 6 months	6	1.70%
	6 months–1 year (inclusive)	13	3.69%
	1–2 years (inclusive)	77	21.88%
	2–3 years (inclusive)	120	34.09%
	3–5 years (inclusive)	110	31.25%
	Over 5 years	26	7.39%

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Reliability and Validity Test

In this study, AMOS25.0 software was used to analyze the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the scale. The reliability of the scale was mainly measured by Cronbach's Alpha value and CR value, while the convergent validity was reflected in the AVE value. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha value and CR value of each variable are higher than the threshold of 0.7 (Chen & Zahedi, 2016), which means that the scale has good reliability; the AVE value of all variables is greater than 0.5 (Hair, 2006), indicating that the scale has good convergent validity. In addition, the square root of the AVE value of each variable is greater than the correlation coefficient between that variable and other variables, which means that the scale has good discriminant validity.

Table 2 Reliability and Validity Test (n=352)

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	PC	IC	LEC	PT
PC	0.751	0.756	0.511	0.715			
IC	0.773	0.776	0.537	0.575	0.733		
LEC	0.767	0.766	0.523	0.590	0.607	0.723	
PT	0.750	0.750	0.502	0.637	0.658	0.645	0.708

Note: The diagonal line is the square root of AVE

### Variable Assignment and Calibration

Assigning values and calibrating the data is a necessary step prior to conducting fsQCA configurational analysis, and its purpose is to assign set membership values to the raw data (Du & Jia, 2017). The main process is as follows: First, calculate the mean of the measurement items under each variable and use this mean as the reflection value of the variable. Subsequently, using the direct calibration method, the maximum, mean, and minimum values of the reflection values of the three antecedent variables—professional capability (PC), interaction capability (IC), and language expression capability (LEC)—and the outcome variable perceived trust (PT) are set as the full membership point (corresponding to a set membership score of 0.95), the crossover point (corresponding to a set membership score of 0.5), and the full non-membership point (corresponding to a set membership score of 0.05), respectively. The variable calibration anchor points are shown in Table 3 (anchor points are retained to three decimal places). Finally, to avoid the situation where a variable's membership score is 0.5 and thus the data is not included in the analysis, this paper adds a constant of 0.001 to all variables with a set membership score of 0.5 (Zhang & Du, 2019).

Table3 Calibration Anchor

Variable	Full Membership	Cross-over	Full Non-membership
Professional Capability (PC)	4.667	4.333	2.333
Interaction Capability (IS)	4.667	4.333	2.333
Language Expression Capability (LES)	4.667	4.333	2.667
Perceived Trust (PT)	4.667	4.000	2.333

### Necessity Analysis

Necessity analysis refers to the extent to which the outcome set constitutes a subset of the condition set, and can be used to characterize the explanatory power of a single condition variable for the outcome variable (Gan, Qiu & Xu, 2020). Before constructing the truth table and conducting the standardization analysis, it is necessary to conduct necessity

analysis first. Necessity conditions are generally regarded as core conditions in configurational paths. Consistency is a key indicator for measuring and judging whether a single antecedent variable is a necessary condition. The consistency threshold for necessary conditions is generally considered to be 0.9 (Chi, Du & Wang, 2021). This paper uses the fsQCA software to conduct necessity analysis. The results are shown in Table 4. The consistency scores of the three antecedent variables are all less than 0.9, indicating that a single antecedent variable cannot constitute a necessary condition for live-streaming e-commerce consumers perceived trust in hosts.

Table 4 Results of Necessity Analysis

Variable	High Perceived Trust		Low Perceived Trust	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
PC	0.688	0.875	0.527	0.583
~PC	0.672	0.621	0.887	0.712
IC	0.738	0.833	0.535	0.526
~IC	0.580	0.589	0.830	0.734
LEC	0.745	0.801	0.574	0.537
~LEC	0.569	0.606	0.787	0.728

### fsQCA Configurational Analysis

In fsQCA configurational analysis,  $m$  antecedent conditions can produce  $2^m$  conditional configurations. This paper includes three antecedent variables, and theoretically, 23 (=8) conditional configurations can be obtained. However, not all conditional configurations can correspond to research cases in the actual research process. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a truth table and set reasonable thresholds to simplify all conditional configurations. Referring to the study of Zhang and Du (2019) and combining the actual situation of this paper, the original consistency threshold and PRI consistency threshold are set at 0.8 and 0.75, respectively, and the case frequency threshold is set at 1 to obtain the truth table that meets the threshold requirements. Then, fsQCA configurational analysis is carried out on this basis. In the process of standard analysis of the truth table by fsQCA software, three types of solutions are generated: complex solutions, intermediate solutions, and parsimonious solutions. When an antecedent variable appears in both the intermediate solution and the parsimonious solution at the same time, the condition is recorded as a core condition; if an antecedent variable only appears in the intermediate solution, the condition is recorded as a peripheral condition. To ensure that the configurational analysis results are representative, this paper retains only the conditional configurations with unique coverage greater than 0.01. Finally, three high-perceived trust conditional configurations and one low-perceived trust conditional configuration are obtained (as shown in Table 5).

Table 5 Conditional Configurations of Host Capability Affecting Consumer Perceived Trust

Antecedent Variables	High Perceived Trust			Low Perceived Trust
	H1	H2	H3	L1
PC	●	●		⊗
IC	●		●	⊗
LEC		●	●	⊗
Consistency	0.947	0.914	0.904	0.841
Raw Coverage	0.586	0.617	0.624	0.655
Unique Coverage	0.038	0.069	0.076	0.655

Overall Consistency	0.874	0.841
Overall Coverage	0.731	0.655

Note: ● represents the presence of a core condition; ⊗ represents the absence of a core condition; blanks indicate that the variable, whether present or absent, does not affect the outcome variable.

In the fsQCA analysis results, it is generally believed that when the overall consistency level is greater than 0.8, the derived conditional configurations have good explanatory power (Chi, Du & Wang, 2021). As shown in Table 5, the overall consistency level of the conditional configurations of e-commerce host capability for high perceived trust of consumers is 0.874, and the consistency level of each configuration is above 0.904, with an overall coverage of 0.731. This indicates that the analysis results can explain about 73.1% of the cases, and each configuration has strong explanatory power. In addition, the overall consistency level of e-commerce host capability for low perceived trust of consumers is 0.841, with an overall coverage of 0.655, which also meets the overall consistency threshold level. In conclusion, the conditional configuration analysis results obtained in this paper have strong explanatory power.

### Robustness Test

To ensure the reliability of the research results, this paper conducts a robustness test on the above four conditional configurations (H1, H2, H3, L1). Considering the characteristics of the data sample, this paper decides to change the PRI consistency threshold to conduct the robustness test. The specific operation is to adjust the PRI consistency threshold from 0.75 to 0.7 and then re-perform the configurational analysis. The new configurational results obtained are basically consistent with the original results, with only minor changes in various indicators such as consistency and coverage. In conclusion, the four conditional configuration analysis results mined in this paper have good robustness.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS, RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATION

### Discussion of Results

This study employs fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to conduct a configurational analysis of the impact of e-commerce host capabilities on consumer perceived trust, exploring the combined influence mechanisms of the three condition variables: professional capability, interaction capability, and language expression capability of the host.

From the results of the conditional configuration analysis, there are three conditional configurations (H1, H2, H3) that lead to high perceived trust of consumers towards live-streaming e-commerce hosts: (1) The H1 configuration (PC\*IC), where both the professional capability (PC) and interaction capability (IC) of the e-commerce host are core conditions. This indicates that when consumers perceive that the e-commerce host has strong professional capability and strong interaction capability, it can generate a high level of perceived trust in the host. (2) The H2 configuration (PC\*LEC), in which the professional capability (PC) and language expression capability (LEC) of the e-commerce host are core conditions. This shows that when consumers perceive that the e-commerce host has strong professional capability and strong language expression capability, it can also lead to high perceived trust in the host. (3) The H3 configuration (IC\*LEC), where the interaction capability (IC) and language expression capability (LEC) of the e-commerce host are core conditions. This suggests that when the e-commerce host has both strong interaction capability and strong language expression capability, it can also result in high perceived trust from consumers. In addition, there is only one conditional configuration for low perceived trust of consumers towards e-commerce hosts: the L1 configuration (~PC\*~IC\*~LEC). This configuration shows that when the professional capability (PC), interaction capability (IC), and language expression capability (LEC) of the e-commerce host are all absent as core conditions, it significantly weakens consumers' perceived trust in the host.

### Research Significance

From a theoretical perspective, this paper attempts to conduct a configurational analysis of the impact of e-commerce host capabilities on consumer perceived trust in live-streaming e-commerce. Previous studies have mainly used statistical analysis methods and structural equation modeling to explore the impact of individual factors. In contrast, this study employs fsQCA to focus on the combined influence of different capability elements of e-commerce hosts on consumer perceived trust in the live-streaming room. This further deepens the understanding of the mechanism of consumer trust in live-streaming and once again confirms and expands the feasibility and effectiveness of fsQCA in the field of consumer behavior. From a practical standpoint, this study provides

theoretical guidance for live-streaming sales companies to better cultivate hosts. Live-streaming sales companies should enhance the capabilities of e-commerce hosts by building a three-in-one capability enhancement system with “professional capability as the foundation, interaction capability as the bond, and language expression capability as the bridge”: constructing a three-dimensional knowledge system of “product - industry - scenario” to improve the professional capability of e-commerce hosts, solving the issue of “credibility” and making consumers believe that “the host knows the field”; transforming from “skill execution” to “user thinking” to upgrade the interaction capability of e-commerce hosts, addressing the issue of “affinity” and making consumers feel that “the host understands me”; creating an expression system with “infectiousness - rhythm - penetration” to optimize the language expression capability of e-commerce hosts, resolving the issue of “infectiousness” and making consumers agree that “the host makes sense.”

### Research Limitations

This study inevitably has certain limitations. First, it mainly focuses on the relationship between e-commerce host capability and consumer perceived trust in the live-streaming room. Further research could add purchase intention and combine multiple methods (e.g., SEM with fsQCA) to explore the impact mechanism among e-commerce host capabilities, consumer trust, and purchase intention. Second, it does not pay attention to the possible differences among different consumer groups, such as gender differences. Subsequent research could consider the impact brought by gender differences. Third, it only focuses on the professional capability, interaction capability, and language expression capability of e-commerce hosts, while there are many other factors that affect consumer trust in the live-streaming room. Further research could focus on the impact mechanism of other factors and their combinations.

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