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Negotiating transgender identity and well-being in Javanese Muslim contexts: Religiosity and social support

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how religiosity and social support shape the identities and impact the well-being of transgender people in Javanese Muslim society. This research uses a qualitative approach and employs in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations, and documentation within transgender communities in Yogyakarta and Central Java. This study included 11 transgender individuals from Yogyakarta and Central Java. The study reveals that transgender identity is formed through adaptation and negotiation within families, schools, social circles, and religious communities. Family and community support are key to maintaining mental health and social relationships, whereas limited gender norms and strongly held religious views restrict the social space for transgender people. This study stresses that the well-being of transgender people is not only affected by psychological and economic factors but also by positive social acceptance and access to inclusive places of worship. These results contribute to an integrative understanding of gender, religiosity, and social support within the Javanese socio-religious context.

Keywords: gender; Javanese Muslim; religiosity; social support; transgender

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Javanese society, gender is usually seen as either male or female, with clear differences in the roles each gender is expected to play. Men are usually associated with logic, power, and leadership, whereas women are often associated with taking care of household duties and being caring and supportive. This reflects wider trends in gender roles and dominant masculine ideas that [Connell \(2005\)](#) discussed, and it also connects with research on how gender works in Javanese culture ([Geertz, 1961](#); [Geertz, 1960](#)). These customs originate from tradition and religious interpretations, reinforcing narrow gender positions. Thus, gender expressions outside the binary are often viewed as deviations from social and religious norms ([Altman & Brown, 2024](#)).

Javanese Muslims often view transgender people through a moral and religious lens, frequently associating them with interpretations of religious narratives, such as the story of Prophet Lot, as reflected in broader discourses on gender and sexuality in Indonesian Muslim contexts ([Boellstorff, 2005](#)). This view leads to stigma against transgender people, usually overlooking the complicated ways in which society is organized. Transgender people often encounter difficulties accessing public areas, religious buildings, and participating in religious activities, which can have a harmful impact on their mental health and social connections ([Grant et al., 2011](#); [Hughto et al., 2015](#)). Islamic principles emphasize compassion, justice, and respect. However, these principles often clash with rigid norms, creating tension between religious values and the social recognition of diverse gender expressions.

While research on transgender people in Indonesia has grown, much focuses on stigma, social troubles, or moral views. There is little research on the connection between religion, environmental support, and the well-being of Javanese Muslim transgender people. This article addresses how religion and social support affect the identity formation and well-being of these transgender individuals. In this study, religiosity is understood as a practice shaped by social interactions, which involves religious belief, rituals, personal spiritual experiences, and engagement with religious groups.

Previous studies have often stressed the social stigma against transgender people, while overlooking the roles that religion and social support play. Transgender people work to build spiritual meaning and social networks to help them survive. More work needs to be done to combine gender studies and the sociology of religion to understand how transgender people form identities, practice religion, and receive community support. Social pressures on gender minorities can be understood using the minority stress model, which explains how stigma and discrimination can create ongoing psychological stress ([Meyer, 2003](#)).

Recent global research has shown how religion, social support, and well-being are connected in the lives of transgender people. Studies have indicated that having a supportive family and community can greatly help with mental well-being and accepting one's identity. However, stigma and discrimination continue to be major problems for many people ([McConnell et al., 2015](#); [Hughto et al., 2015](#)). In religious settings, inclusive communities offer spaces where people can explore their identities and feel a sense of belonging, especially for transgender and queer individuals within Muslim communities ([Golriz, 2025](#)). On the other hand, those who feel rejected by their religion tend to experience more psychological stress and are more likely to have poor mental health results, which highlights the need for religious practices that are welcoming and inclusive ([Ryan et al., 2009](#)).

Work in Indonesia also supports these findings. Research indicates that social and cultural norms have a major impact on the formation of transgender identity and the level of social acceptance in religious settings ([Boellstorff, 2005](#); [Woodward, 2011](#)). Religious views can influence how people perceive transgender individuals; however, a more accepting view of Islam can lead to greater tolerance and understanding. Therefore, transgender identity needs to be viewed not only from a moral or religious perspective but also through the support of others, acceptance by the community, and wider recognition in society. Social support can help reduce mental distress, particularly when stigma is involved, as shown by [Cohen and Wills \(1985\)](#). LGBTQ individuals often create positive interpretations to align their gender identity with their religious beliefs.

Studies on stigma, social acceptance, and mental health in transgender communities are common worldwide, including in Indonesia. However, these studies often present transgender people as a marginalized group without exploring how religion and social support interact within specific socioreligious contexts. There is a lack of research connecting religion, social support, and well-being in transgender people, especially in the Javanese Muslim setting. Well-being involves not only subjective happiness but also self-acceptance and autonomy (Ryff, 1989).

The Javanese have specific religio-cultural traits in which religious values, traditions, and social norms interact to shape acceptance or rejection of non-binary gender identities. This study addresses these limitations. In the study of the sociology of religion, understanding religiosity means more than simply following religious rules. It also includes experiences felt and negotiated in social surroundings. Religiosity has several aspects, such as beliefs, practices, experiences, and social effects. Transgender people in Javanese Muslim communities often feel mixed ways about religion; it can be a source of inner peace, but also a place of social judgment. Social support theory states that minority groups are more likely to feel social pressure. Stigma, discrimination, and exclusion can cause lasting mental issues. Strong support—emotional, practical, or spiritual—can defend them from the negative effects of such pressure. Religion can be a source of both conflict and resilience in the formation of minority gender identities (Wilcox, 2003).

In Java, religious norms and local culture that prioritize harmony and moral hierarchy shape social structure. Thus, the transgender experience in practicing religion and seeking social support is closely related to Javanese culture, which values harmony. This study views transgender people as individuals who actively seek ways to live within religious norms, cultural expectations, and their own needs. Given this background, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What does religiosity mean to transgender people in Javanese Muslim society, and how do they practice it? (2) What kind of social support do they receive from family, community, and religious groups, and what is the dynamic? (3) How does the relationship between religiosity and social support affect the formation of identity and psychosocial well-being of transgender people?

This study is intended to make a theoretical contribution to gender studies and the sociology of religion. In practice, this research is also expected to support the strengthening of a more inclusive socio-religious approach by answering the questions raised. This article is organized as follows: the next section explains the research method used, the results are grouped into four main themes, and finally, there is a discussion that links these results to what is already known in the field.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of participants in a specific social-religious setting. It aims to analyze the experiences of transgender people within the social-religious world of Javanese Muslims. The study focuses on the processes of identity negotiation, social support, and daily well-being.

A qualitative method with a multi-site case study design was chosen because this research seeks to understand the subjective experiences of participants related to gender identity and religiosity. Both aspects are rich in symbolic and emotional value. The multi-site case study helps the researcher to understand the variations in experiences across different social settings and identify the general patterns of social interaction among participants.

In this study, the researcher acted as a participant observer. Repeated interactions helped create trust between the researcher and the participants, allowing for more reflective and real stories to emerge. This research intends to describe the phenomenon and understand the dynamics of meaning in the everyday lives of Javanese Muslim transgender people, concerning identity negotiation, social support, and their well-being.

2.1. Location and Participants

This study was conducted in Yogyakarta and Central Java. These locations were selected because of their active transgender populations and varied religious practices. The participants were 11 transgender people aged 18–45 years. They were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in local transgender communities and religious activities. The criteria included identifying as transgender, living in Yogyakarta or Central Java for at least one year, and willingness to participate in interviews and focus group discussions. The researcher, a Muslim academic based in Yogyakarta who is not part of the transgender community, took steps to reflect on their own perspective in order to reduce any personal bias and ensure that the participants' experiences were portrayed respectfully and accurately.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

Data were gathered through several methods to ensure triangulation: (1) interviews using semi-structured questions to understand personal experiences related to identity, religiosity, and social support; (2) focus group discussions with 4–6 participants per session to explore collective experiences and community dynamics; (3) direct observation in transgender communities and places of worship to observe social interactions and religious practices; and (4) documentation, including field notes, photos of community activities, and related archives, to support the findings.

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian or Javanese, depending on the participant's preference, and each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. Focus group discussions were organized after several individual interviews to explore shared themes and differences in experience more carefully. This sequence helped the researcher compare personal narratives with collective community perspectives and identify recurring patterns across sites. Data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged, indicating adequate thematic saturation for the scope of this qualitative inquiry.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which included transcription of interviews and focus group discussions, initial coding to identify important themes related to identity, religiosity, social support, and well-being, and grouping codes into main categories and themes. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-step method, which included becoming familiar with the data, performing initial coding, developing themes, reviewing the findings, defining the themes clearly, and finally reporting the results. These findings were interpreted in the social-religious context of Javanese Muslim society.

This study adhered to the ethical standards of social research. Participants were recruited via community networks and recommendations from within transgender communities. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the guarantee of anonymity. Informed consent was secured prior to data collection. To ensure data validity, this study used source and method triangulation. Member checking was conducted by asking participants to review summaries of interview results to confirm the researcher's interpretations.

To strengthen analytic trustworthiness, coding was conducted iteratively by moving back and forth between transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials. Preliminary interpretations were compared across cases to distinguish shared patterns from site-specific experiences, and analytic memos were used to record emerging concepts, researcher reflections, and possible biases during the interpretation. This reflexive process was important because the study examined sensitive issues of gender, religion, and social belonging in a context where participants often negotiate visibility and vulnerability in everyday life.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The results show that religiosity, social support, and well-being are closely connected to each other. Social support helps people feel safer when expressing their religion, and when religion is inclusive, it can improve mental health. The analysis showed that transgender experiences in Javanese Muslim society vary significantly. This variation is shaped by the interaction between social structures,

religious norms, and support from personal relationships. The data revealed four main themes as the most prominent patterns. Data analysis pointed to four key themes related to transgender experiences in Javanese Muslim society: (1) identity adjustment, (2) social support, (3) resistance to gender and religious norms, and (4) inclusive religious experiences.

3.1.1. Identity Construction

Transgender identity develops through a constant adaptation process within family, school, peer groups, and religious communities. People often report needing to balance gender expression with social expectations and religious norms. One participant (T1, age 27) said, “I learned how to behave at home, in the mosque, and at school. Sometimes I have to restrain myself, but sometimes I can express myself safely in a supportive setting.”

This indicates that transgender identity is situational and context-dependent. People actively manage how they present themselves and adapt to different social spaces. This strategy can be seen as a way of dealing with social problems to maintain psychological safety. This identity work does not occur internally alone; it also involves active interactions with others to gain social recognition. This strategy is important for maintaining mental health and building positive social relationships.

Across interviews, identity construction was rarely described as a single moment of realization. Instead, participants narrated it as a gradual process of reading social cues, testing boundaries, and deciding when disclosure was emotionally safe. In the Javanese setting, where harmony, respect, and social conformity are strongly valued, many participants developed a careful form of self-presentation that allowed them to remain socially connected while protecting a sense of authenticity. This pattern shows that identity negotiation is not only personal but also relational, shaped by everyday expectations within family and community life.

3.1.2. Social Support

Support from family, friends, and the community plays a key role in the well-being of transgender people. Emotional support, practical help, and identity recognition help people feel accepted and able to deal with stigma. One participant (T7, age 22) said, “At first, my family found it hard to accept, but now they try to call me by my identified name. It makes me more confident and my mental state becomes calmer.”

In addition to family, transgender community groups and friends offer safe places to talk about experiences and develop support among each other. Studies have found that having strong social support can help lessen the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination and boost the mental health of LGBTQ people (McConnell et al., 2015; Cohen & Wills, 1985). In Javanese Muslim communities, family support is important for helping people deal with social pressures and building their ability to recover from difficulties.

The findings also show that social support works at several levels. Emotional support helped participants feel heard and less isolated, practical support assisted them in housing, employment, and access to health services, while spiritual support reassured them that they were still worthy of prayer and moral dignity. However, support was not always stable. Some participants experienced conditional acceptance, for example, being welcomed in private settings but not in public religious activities. This means that the quality of support, not merely its presence, strongly shapes whether it truly improves well-being.

3.1.3. Resistance to Gender Norms and Religion

Despite social support, limited gender norms and rigid religious interpretations remain key problems. Participants mentioned experiences of discrimination in public places, places of worship, and religious activities that stress traditional gender roles. One participant (T3, 30 years old) said, “I am sometimes not allowed into the prayer room because I am seen as not fitting gender norms. It hurts because I want to worship like others.” This experience shows that the well-being of transgender people is not only affected by mental factors but also by social acceptance and access to inclusive public spaces.

Several participants linked these restrictions to broader feelings of social precarity. Being questioned in prayer rooms, schools, or neighborhood spaces not only created embarrassment in the moment but also produced long-term caution about where to go, how to dress, and whether religious participation would lead to conflict. In this sense, exclusion operates as a structural barrier to ordinary citizenship and everyday belonging. The burden was therefore both symbolic and practical because it narrowed access to spaces that most people use without having to negotiate their legitimacy.

3.1.4. Inclusive Religious Experiences

Some more open religious groups allow transgender people to take part in religious activities. Participants reported that inclusive religious experiences increased self-esteem and spiritual well-being. One participant (T12, 25 years old) said in this group, “I can join the Koran recitation and pray without feeling judged. I feel accepted as part of the people”. This experience supports that the well-being of transgender people relates closely to social support, community acceptance, and access to inclusive religious practice.

In addition to inclusive experiences in certain groups, the religious beliefs of the participants also had a strong personal side. Some participants felt their connection with God was direct and not always about whether or not they are accepted by society. When rejected, personal religious activities, such as praying and reading the Koran, became a source of peace. This shows that religion is not always about formal institutions but can be an independent spiritual relationship.

Problems occur when personal religious beliefs clash with social rules in public spaces. Some participants felt unsure when they had to join communal worship that separated men and women. Eventually, they created their own ways, such as praying at home or searching for more accepting communities. This shows that religion for transgender people in Javanese Muslim society is complex: it involves personal spirituality, social acceptance, and limiting rules. Their religious identity constantly changes based on the social situations they face. When there is social support, religion becomes a source of strength. However, if social spaces are limited, religion can become a source of problems.

Importantly, an inclusive religious experience did not mean that all tensions had disappeared. Rather, it created limited but meaningful spaces where participants could practice Islam without immediate surveillance of gender expression. These spaces mattered because they restored the possibility of ordinary worship and not exceptional treatment. Participants often described relief when they were able to join recitation, prayer, or discussion circles as fellow believers. Such experiences strengthened self-worth and reduced the sense that religious and gender identities had to be placed in constant opposition.

3.2. Discussion

This study explores how transgender identity develops in Javanese Muslim communities, showing the intricate balance between societal expectations and religious beliefs. This corresponds with previous research on how gender identity, social systems, and religious backgrounds work together to affect the lives and health of transgender people (Boellstorff, 2005; Peletz, 2009; Golriz, 2025).

Participants actively attempt to balance their gender expression with current norms and religious values, suggesting that identity is dynamic and constantly changes depending on interactions with the social and religious environment. Studies have revealed that having a strong support system and access to welcoming religious environments are important for the health and happiness of transgender people. This corresponds with the findings of Lestari (2023) and Umroh (2022), who described that *Pesantren Waria Al Fatah* in Yogyakarta supports identity affirmation and builds collective resilience within transgender communities.

This pattern can also be explained through the minority stress perspective. Repeated adjustments to avoid judgment, ridicule, or exclusion create a cumulative psychological burden, even when participants appear socially adaptable (Meyer, 2003). Simultaneously, the Javanese emphasis on harmony explains why many participants chose negotiation over confrontation. Their strategies were not signs of weak identity; rather, they reflected a culturally situated effort to preserve dignity, reduce conflict, and

maintain social ties in settings where recognition remains uneven (Geertz, 1960; Geertz, 1961; Woodward, 2011).

3.2.1. The Importance of Social Support for Well-being

Having support from family, friends, and the transgender community plays a significant role in maintaining strong mental health and helping people feel more accepted by society. This aligns with earlier research demonstrating that having a strong support system greatly improves mental health and helps reduce the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination on transgender and LGBT people (McConnell et al., 2015; London-Nadeau et al., 2023; Pepping et al., 2024). Supportive social groups not only lower the risk of mental health issues but also help transgender people feel socially and spiritually accepted.

The social support people get affects how they keep playing their social roles, not just their feelings. People who feel accepted by their families usually find it simpler to get an education and work formally. This helps them feel better about themselves and have a good view of who they are. Some people say that having family support gives them the courage to deal with social stress outside their homes.

Without family support, people often look for acceptance in other social places that might not be safe in terms of money and health. This shows that social support can prevent structural vulnerabilities. This helps reduce the mental load and makes it easier to participate in more stable social activities. Regarding social well-being, support groups help people feel like they are part of a community. This feeling of belonging is necessary to build social integration. Therefore, social support is a key factor in shaping the psychosocial well-being of transgender people in Javanese Muslim society.

However, not every participant felt that their level of religiosity was connected with the social support they received. Some people had strong personal faith, even though they were not widely accepted by others, while others received support from their community but still struggled with inner conflicts about their religion.

3.2.2. Challenges from Gender and Religious Norms

Gender norms and religious beliefs still pose difficulties, even when there is social support available. This matches earlier research that found a link between religious rejection and conflict and a higher risk of mental health issues and suicidal ideation among LGBT people (Ryan et al., 2009; Lefevor et al., 2020). Discrimination in public and religious settings shows that there is a greater need for more inclusive and respectful ways to handle gender diversity in religious practices.

This study shows that gender in Javanese Muslim society is both normative and institutionalized. These norms are present in education, worship spaces, and government rules that require a binary classification of men and women. Transgender people fall between these categories and are not fully accepted by either. Consequently, they have mixed feelings: they are still part of the Muslim community, but their social involvement is limited.

These ideas provide insight into the link between religion and gender identity. Religion does not simply accept or reject; it is also a social space shaped by power, interpretation, and culture. Therefore, it is vital to understand gender diversity in a more open and contextual way to avoid social exclusion. This study clarifies that the well-being of transgender people is closely tied to larger social changes. Social support needs to grow with a reinterpretation of religious norms based on fairness and respect for people.

Therefore, the findings suggest that religious exclusion should not be understood only as a doctrinal issue. It is also reproduced through everyday gatekeeping by local institutions and social actors who decide who appears respectable in public religious life. This helps explain why some participants maintained strong private faith while distancing themselves from formal worship spaces. Similar to earlier work on sexuality and religion, the present study shows that believers may continue to construct affirming meanings even when institutional recognition is weak (Wilcox, 2003).

3.2.3. Inclusive Religious Experience as a Way to Improve Well-being

Inclusive faith experiences can boost well-being. Some religious groups that are open provide a safe space for people to worship and connect. Support from inclusive communities is very important because it helps transgender people navigate their identity and improves their mental and social health. Research indicates that having a strong sense of community and feeling included in one's environment can lead to better mental health and help people feel more confident about who they are (Compare et al., 2024; Golriz, 2024).

Inclusive faith has a significant impact on a person's emotional state. Involvement without fear makes people feel accepted, which builds self-esteem. Some participants said that inclusive places of worship have aided them in aligning their gender and religion, thereby lowering internal conflict. Inclusive religious practices can make life more meaningful. People feel like they belong and are linked to a religious group. This means that religion could be a source of psychological healing if practiced without discrimination. Being inclusive in religion is not just a matter of theology but also social and mental well-being. Access to open religious practices allows people to build complete identities without having to choose between being themselves and being part of a religious group.

3.2.4. Religion is a Place to Discuss Identity

This study found that religion was not always a reason for rejecting ideas. Some participants saw religion as a source of peace and spiritual support, showing that in Javanese Muslim culture, religion is adaptable and has varied meanings. Religion can cause problems but also provides strength. The relationship between religion and gender identity is complex. Religion can be a source of pressure and freedom. It is interpreted by people in society, religious leaders, and culture. Among Javanese Muslims, more open interpretations of religion emerge from personal relationships and alternative communities rather than from official religious institutions.

It is important to view religiosity as a negotiated social practice and not a fixed rule. When transgender people find accepting spiritual communities, religiosity becomes a source of strength. However, narrow interpretations of religion can reinforce exclusion. The well-being of transgender people depends on society's ability to promote dialogue and broaden the understanding of gender diversity within human values and social justice.

3.2.5. Research Contribution

This study adds value to the literature by merging gender and the sociology of religion perspectives. Past studies tended to separate the psychological and religious aspects. This study shows that identity, social support, and well-being are related in the lives of transgender people. The findings in Java show how religious and cultural values can interact and shape well-being, which makes it a valuable addition to studies at the international level.

More specifically, this study contributes by showing that religiosity, support, and well-being are mutually reinforcing rather than separate domains. Psychological well-being cannot be reduced to individual coping alone because it is shaped by whether participants are socially recognized and able to practice religion with dignity. This point extends discussions of well-being beyond subjective comfort toward self-acceptance, social integration, and a sense of moral legitimacy in everyday life (Ryff, 1989; Cohen & Wills, 1985). The Javanese Muslim context makes this contribution especially important because it reveals how local cultural expectations mediate the relationship between religion and gender diversity.

3.2.6. Practical Implication

The results of this study can provide input for policymakers, religious groups, and transgender communities. Religious leaders can initiate open conversations by talking with people in their local communities. Universities and non-governmental organizations can offer workshops to educate the public about gender issues, and families can receive support through counseling programs. Inclusive programs that support the recognition of transgender identity are needed in social settings and places of

worship. Education and training for families and society are needed to understand gender diversity from religious and cultural perspectives. Support for transgender groups can be increased to build safe social networks.

3.2.7. Limitations exist in this study

The sample size was small, with only 11 participants from Yogyakarta and Central Java. This potentially limits how well the findings represent the transgender community across Indonesia. The study used qualitative data; therefore, quantitative generalizations can not be made. This research also concentrated on the views of the transgender community, excluding the perspectives of families or the larger Javanese Muslim population. Future studies could use quantitative methods or compare different regions. The aim should be to broaden our understanding of identity, social support, and religion for transgender people in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

4.1. Conclusion

In summary, transgender identity in the Javanese Muslim community is formed through social and religious discussions and adjustments. Their happiness and health rely on many things like their mind, money, and relationships, such as support from family and friend, and being able to participate in religious communities that welcome everyone. Social support and inclusive religious experiences can help improve mental health, foster acceptance, and strengthen a sense of identity; however, strict gender norms and conservative interpretations continue to pose challenges. This research combines perspectives on gender and the sociology of religion to demonstrate that transgender individuals play a key role in shaping their own religious experiences and the communities in which they are involved. Building welcoming social and religious spaces is important for enhancing the overall happiness and health of transgender individuals. This study, grounded in a local setting, contributes to global discussions about social norms, religion, and the well-being of transgender individuals, highlighting the importance of combining different fields of study.

4.2. Recommendation

The study findings lead to the following recommendations for religious groups, families, social circles, and future research: (1) for religious groups and organizations: (a) construct places of worship that are accessible to transgender individuals, enabling them to participate in religious activities, and (b) supply discussion forums to grow public understanding of gender diversity in Islam; (2) for families and social environments: (a) offer emotional support and identity acceptance, which will likely improve mental and social well-being, and (b) teach family members and the public about the effects of stigma and discrimination on mental health; and (3) for future studies: (a) broaden the sample geographically and demographically to obtain a more representative sample, (a) add quantitative methods to statistically measure the relationship between religiosity, social support, and well-being, and (c) study the views of Javanese Muslims, including families and religious figures, to understand the social dynamics that affect transgender people.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

Not Applicable

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Notes on Contributors

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