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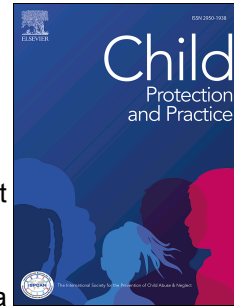
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Title: Association between Childhood Sexual Violence and low Educational Attainment Among Young People Aged 18-24: Evidence from the 2018 Uganda Violence Against Children Survey

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Abstract

Background: Researchers have identified various factors that contribute to low levels of educational attainment. However, studies examining the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and educational attainment remain scarce. Understanding this relationship is vital since experiencing violence during childhood is associated with poor educational outcomes and a higher likelihood of financial difficulties and employment issues later in life.

Objective: This study sought to understand the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment for male and female young adults.

Participants and setting: The study uses data from the Uganda Violence Against Children Survey (2018), focusing on participants aged 18-24.

Methods: Secondary analysis was done using STATA 14 among participants aged 18-24 years from whom responses on childhood sexual violence (CSV) victimization were solicited. CSV was measured in its different forms i.e., unwanted sexual touches, attempted forced sex, physically forced sex, pressured sex and sexual exploitation, while low educational attainment was defined as being out of school and having primary or less as the highest level of education. Bivariable analysis and multivariable logistic regressions were conducted.

Results: The majority (67.2%) of the sample of 2312 young adults had low educational attainment. Basing on the different forms of childhood sexual violence victimization (sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual touches, attempted forced sex, physically forced sex and pressured sex), low education attainment ranged between 59.2% and 72.3% for males and 50.9% and 72.4% for females. The different forms of CSV were not significantly associated with low educational attainment except attempted forced sex among females ($P=0.011$) in the bivariate analysis and child marriage in the multivariate model ($P=0.022$).

Conclusion: Low levels of educational attainment in Uganda are prevalent and could be influenced by various factors that warrant further investigation. There is a need for additional research to clarify the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment. Considering the well-established advantages of education for individuals and communities, it is essential to strengthen initiatives aimed at increasing both access to and the quality of educational services.

Keywords: Childhood sexual violence; Sexual violence; Education; Low educational attainment; Uganda; National Violence Against Children Survey; Violence against Children

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone for individual and societal development, offering numerous positive outcomes such as poverty reduction, enhanced employability, better health, and intergenerational transfer of achievements (Aksentijević & Ježić, 2019; Awan et al., 2011; Elmurod, 2021; Idris et al., 2012; Lear, 2019; Wodon et al., 2017). It is considered a powerful tool for change, personal fulfilment, social well-being, and societal transformation (Vera-Toscano et al., 2017; Voicerising, 2013). Scholars also esteem education as the key to a better future (UNESCO¹ & World Bank, 2021). Beyond its instrumental benefits, education is a

¹ UNESCO stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

fundamental human right enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Barnes, 2018; Kiilu & Mugambi, 2019). This appreciation and benefits alluded to indicate the need for every child to attain a considerable level of education.

In the literature, there is evidence of the bidirectional relationship between violence and education. Education is theorized to protect children against violence hence schooling is a key protective factor against violence against children (VAC) in child protection efforts (Behrman et al., 2017; Grant, 2012; Wodon et al., 2017). Educated individuals are less likely to perpetrate or experience violence (Kuunibe et al., 2023). Countries with higher levels of education enjoy peaceful social, economic and political lives compared to those with low educational attainment (GPE & IEP, 2024). Low educational attainment, on the other hand, may be a risk factor for violence and vice versa as evidence shows that experience of violence can lead to poor education outcomes (Sherr et al., 2016).

There are several initiatives in place to foster the education of all children among which include the Sustainable Development Goal Four (United Nations, 2015). However, universal education remains a challenge. The world has not yet realized 100% enrollment and completion of elementary education as 251 million children and youth remain out of school (UNESCO, 2024). The gap between high-income countries and low-income countries is notable and worrying, for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, half of all children are out of school (UNESCO, 2024). Several factors continue to affect education attainment over time. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic presented risks for teenage pregnancies, resulting in high school dropout rates, especially for girls (Kiconco, 2021; UNESCO & World Bank, 2021). School closures to contain the spread of COVID-19 also amplified negative sexual practices and schooling outcomes for adolescent girls (Zulaika et al., 2022). Other factors affecting education attainment include childhood sexual violence, given its disastrous effects on the survivors (Manukrishnan & Bhagabati, 2023).

Childhood sexual violence victimization is a global pandemic impacting children's wellbeing (Ligiero et al., 2019). Globally, over 120 million girls and an unknown number of boys under the age of 20 experience sexual violence (UNICEF², 2022). In Africa, statistics show that about four in ten girls experience sexual violence by age 15 (End Violence against Children, 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa suffers the most with a prevalence estimated between 30%-40% (APEVAC³ & ACPF⁴, 2022). Currently, childhood sexual violence victimization is the second most prominent child protection issue in Uganda (MGLSD⁵ 2023). Generally, childhood sexual violence victimization has negative short-term and lifelong consequences for the survivors (Hailes et al., 2019), including mental distress, suicidal contemplation, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (MGLSD, 2018). Most of these consequences are well-researched (Amado et al., 2015; Hailes et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2017). However, there is limited exploration of the effect of childhood sexual violence victimization on low educational attainment (Henok, 2015). Therefore, this study examines the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment based on the trauma theory. According to the trauma theory, individuals face different traumas which may have lasting effects on their entire lifetime (Turner, 2018). Childhood sexual violence victimization is among the adverse events humans may experience in

² UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

³ APEVAC: African Partnership to End Violence Against Children

⁴ ACPF: African Child Policy Forum

⁵ MGLSD: Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development

their lifetime (Turner, 2018), as such it overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life (Suleiman, 2008). Like many traumatic events, childhood sexual violence produces an excess of external stimuli and excitation in the brain, making it unable to assimilate such an event (Suleiman, 2008). Hence, the brain responds in various mechanisms, such as shutting down normal emotional responses, which can affect someone's educational attainment. Indeed, Johnson (2018) shows that children who experience trauma are more prone to academic underachievement and negative school experiences in comparison to those who have not experienced it. Frieze (2015) also shares deeply how trauma impacts learning, social behavior, emotional and psychological functioning which are instrumental in education attainment. This scholar for instance, indicates that children who have been exposed to trauma, including childhood sexual violence victimization, have poorer academic performance overall, including poor attendance and low reading levels. Such children may display different behaviors detrimental to their ability to concentrate. They are usually anxious, fearful and forced to suppress the traumatic memories, hence affecting their education attainment. The worst-case scenario of childhood sexual violence victimization is that many of its survivors do not seek help due to fear and shame (Henkhaus, 2022). This amplifies the persistence of mental health symptoms which may have an effect on educational attainment. Therefore, grounded on these assumptions of the trauma theory, the secondary analysis sought to establish the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment.

Generally, childhood sexual violence victimization is highly destructive and may contribute to survivors' poor performance and lead to a higher risk of dropping out of school (Jere, 2015). Indeed, some studies report that sexual violence victimization affects children's educational achievements. For instance, Fry et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis reports that 13% of the girls who experienced sexual violence had a threefold increased risk of absenteeism from school compared to their counterparts. Nikischer's (2014) qualitative study found that young women who had been sexually abused declined to pursue their education due to the traumatic effects of sexual violence, such as self-blaming, which never allowed them to concentrate on their studies. Molstad et al.(2021)'s systematic review also found that sexual assault was associated with more academic problems, including lower grade point average, dropping out of university, and self-regulated learning problems for female students at higher institutions of learning. Stermac et al.'s (2020) quantitative study also showed that sexual violence had a deleterious impact on women's academic performance. In this study, women students who experienced sexual violence reported more delays and failures on assignments, courses, and exams. They were also more likely to endorse attendance problems and thoughts of dropping out compared to students not reporting sexual violence.

The above studies illustrate the likely effect of childhood sexual violence victimization on educational attainment. However, they were conducted in and present the situation in high-income countries (Fry et al., 2018; Molstad et al., 2021; Nikischer, 2014; Stermac et al., 2020). Some studies also have methodological limitations and may not provide a clear relationship between the variables being studied in the current study. For example, Fry et al.'s meta-analysis (2018) combined several studies and may have ignored important differences in such studies, such as differences in contexts, as Lee (2019) suggests. Others were qualitative, for example (Nikischer, 2014), which limits the generalization of their findings to a bigger population. Furthermore, available studies focused mainly on females (Molstad et al., 2021; Nikischer, 2014) and university students (Molstad et al., 2021; Stermac et al., 2020) to examine the effect of sexual violence victimization on educational attainment. This limits our appreciation of how childhood sexual violence victimization contributes to low educational attainment at other levels of educational

attainment, such as secondary education. Finally, the existing studies consider sexual violence victimization in a general sense without disaggregating the association of each of its different forms (sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual touches, attempted forced sex, physically forced sex and pressured sex) on low educational attainment. Also, the majority of these studies are not focused on childhood sexual violence victimization.

Therefore, the current study uses the secondary data from the Uganda Violence Against Children Survey, a national study, to provide statistical relations between different forms of childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainments for both male and female young people aged 18- 24 years in Uganda. In this secondary analysis, our team used cross-sectional approach to measuring the association between lower education attainment and CSV among young adult participants and by sex. Childhood sexual violence victimization refers to all forms of sexual abuse, such as unwanted sexual touches, attempted forced sex, physically forced sex, pressured sex and sexual exploitation experienced before the age of 18 years.

This study contributes to the global body of knowledge regarding this issue, especially from low- and middle-income countries, particularly Uganda, where there is limited knowledge about this subject. This analysis' primary focus on childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment also makes it an asset for informing specific policy and programming for prevention and response in Uganda and similar developing countries.

Methods

The study uses data from the Uganda Violence Against Children Survey (2018). This was a cross-sectional survey conducted as a collaboration between the Uganda Ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) and the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC), Together for Girls, ChildFund Uganda, Makerere School of Public Health, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Uganda and The AfriChild Centre. Participants in the analytic dataset were 2,312 young adults, aged 18-24, who completed the Uganda Violence Against Children survey in 2018. Young adults in the study were asked about their childhood exposure to violence. The respondents were selected through a multistage cluster sampling using a split approach involving the identification of Enumeration Areas (EA) based on Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) areas for nationally representative data. The split sampling approach was used to avoid interviewing both the victim and perpetrator in the same area.

Measurement of independent and outcome variables

The secondary analysis in the current study focused on childhood sexual violence victimization among young people 18-24 years. The independent variable in the study was childhood sexual violence victimization, while the outcome variable was low educational attainment. Childhood sexual violence victimization was defined and measured based on experiencing any or all of the following different forms: sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual touches, attempted forced sex, physically forced sex and pressured sex described in the survey (see questions 500 to 900 in VACs questionnaire).

Low educational attainment (outcome variable) was measured based on three questions: 1) whether participants had ever attended school (93.3%) 2) whether participants were currently attending school (18.9%); and 3) highest level of education (32.7%). We categorized education into two levels: low educational attainment and high educational attainment. Low educational

attainment (outcome variable) was defined as being out of school and having the highest level of education completed as primary or below, while high educational attainment was considered as being currently in school or having more than primary as the highest level of education completed. The control variables in this study included age, sex, relationship with biological mother, marital status, work status, orphan hood, and child marriage. The control variables were identified based on; literature review, knowledge of the researchers and an exploration of the dataset. We hypothesized that experiencing childhood sexual violence victimization increases rates of lower educational attainment for all young adults.

Statistical Analysis

We conducted a bivariable analysis and cross-tabulations to present the different forms of sexual violence victimization by sex (males and females) and the association of the different variables with low educational attainment. An analytic dataset was generated from the survey data set by solely analyzing data of 18–24-year-olds. A weighted analysis was conducted to cater for clustering of survey results. Univariate analysis was conducted for participant demographics, bivariable analyses were conducted for key variables and outcome variables, and a binary logistic regression model was fitted for multi-variable analysis. Findings from the univariate analysis are presented as counts and percentages. Bivariable analysis findings are presented as percentages, 95% confidence intervals and associated p-values from a chi-square statistical test. The multivariable logistic model presents both unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios as measures of associations.

Results

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Sex n (%)		Overall n(%)	P- Value
	Male	Female		
Overall	868 (37.5)	1444 (62.46)	2312 (100)	
<i>Age in years (groups)</i>				
18-20	332 (38.2)	671 (46.4)	1003 (43.8)	
21-24	536 (61.75)	773 (53.5)	1309 (56.6)	0.000*
<i>Closeness to biological mother</i>				
Close	766 (88.2)	1242 (86.0)	2008 (86.8)	
Not close	102 (11.7)	202 (13.9)	304 (13.1)	0.123
<i>Marital status</i>				
Married/ living with a partner	466 (53.6)	1238 (85.7)	1704 (73.7)	
Never married/Single	402(46.3)	206 (14.2)	608 (26.3)	0.000*
<i>Work status</i>				
Not working	69 (7.9)	436 (30.1)	505(21.8)	
Working	799 (92.0)	1008(69.8)	1807 (78.1)	0.000*
<i>Educational attainment (EA*)</i>				
Low (Primary and below)	579 (66.7)	976 (67.5)	1,555 (67.2)	
High (Secondary and above)	289 (33.2)	468 (32.4)	757 (32.7)	0.661
<i>Orphan hood prior to age 18</i>				
Yes	67 (7.7)	142 (9.8)	209 (9.0)	

No	801 (92.2)	1302 (90.1)	2103 (91.0)	0.086
Marriage				
Married before 18	42(4.8)	440 (30.5)	482 (21.0)	
Not married before 18	826 (95.1)	1004 (69.5)	1830 (79.0)	0.000*

Note: * Not married before 18 includes never married.

Majority of the participants were female (62.4%). A little over half (56.6%) were between the ages of 21 and 24, while 43.8% were aged 18 to 20. Over 80% of the participants reported being close to their biological mothers, regardless of their sex. Most of the participants were either married or cohabiting with a partner, with a significantly higher proportion of females in these relationships (85.7%) compared to males (53.6%). Overall, a large majority were employed (78.1%), with this being particularly prevalent among male participant (92.0%) and this was significant ($P=0.000$). Regarding educational achievement, most participants (67.2%) had low levels of education, with only slight variations between males (66.7%) and females (67.5%). A small number of participants (9%) had lost a parent before turning 18, while a portion (21.0%) had gone through early marriage, which is categorized as childhood sexual violence victimization. This was notably more prevalent among females (30.5%) compared to males (4.8%) and was significant ($P=0.000$)

Table 2: Bivariable Associations between Sexual Violence Victimization and Low educational attainment, Disaggregated by Sex (male and female)

Sex	Male n (row%)			Female n(row%)		
	Low	High	P-value	Low	High	P-value
Educational attainment						
Sexual violence						
Sexual exploitation						
No	462(65.4)	244(34.6)	0.669	737 (64.5)	405(35.5)	0.804
Yes	8(59.5)	6(40.5)		57(62.5)	34(37.5)	
Unwanted sexual touches						
No	480(67.8)	227(32.2)	0.549	624(64.7)	339(35.3)	0.462
Yes	100(63.8)	57(36.1)		285(60.2)	188(39.8)	
Attempted forced sex						
No	478(65.5)	249(34.5)	0.203	674(67.8)	319(32.2)	0.011*
Yes	98(72.3)	38(27.7)		227(50.9)	219(49.1)	
Physically forced sex						
No	557(67.0)	273(33.0)	0.960	753(63.6)	430(36.4)	0.672
Yes	24(67.4)	11(32.6)		154(60.3)	100(39.7)	
Pressured sex						
No	373(67.5)	179(32.5)	0.306	811(62.3)	490(37.7)	0.238
Yes	29(59.2)	20(40.8)		102(72.4)	39(27.6)	

Note: the denominators are not similar due to variations in responses for different questions. All P-values presented are from a chi square test.

There was significant association between attempted forced sex among females and low educational attainment (table 2) ($P=0.011$). The results also show that generally, there is low education attainment for survivors of the different forms of childhood sexual violence victimization, even though the sample size within some forms of sexual violence victimization is small, especially for males. For instance, among the 100 male participants who had experienced unwanted sexual touches, 63.8% of them had low education attainment; also, among the 98 who had experienced attempted forced sex, 72.3% had low education attainment. A similar pattern is seen throughout for those who experienced physically forced sex (67.4%) and pressured sex (59.2%).

Among the females, low education attainment is also seen to be common for more than half of the survivors of the different forms of childhood sexual violence victimization. For instance, 72.4% of the 102 survivors of pressured sex, 60.3% of 154 survivors of physically forced sex and 60.2% of the 285 survivors of unwanted sexual touches also had low education attainment. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that young adults in Uganda have low educational attainment, which is visible even among those who had never experienced childhood sexual violence victimization, as shown in Table (2).

Table 3: Logistic Regression of showing association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment

Low education attainment	Unadjusted		Adjusted	
	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P-Value	Odds ratio (95% CI)	P-Value
Sex				
Female	0.85 (0.61,1.17)	0.328	0.61(0.36,1.03)	0.064
Sexual violence				
Yes	0.79 (0.56,1.11)	0.185	1.14(0.45,2.84)	0.775
Sexual Exploitation				
Yes	0.87 (0.47, 1.62)	0.677	0.7(0.29,1.7)	0.434
Unwanted Touches				
Yes	0.80 (0.56, 1.14)	0.225	0.85(0.53,1.36)	0.505
Attempted forced Sex				
Yes	0.72 (0.49,1.08)	0.115	0.81(0.32,2)	0.654
Physically forced sex				
Yes	0.86 (0.53, 1.39)	0.548	0.84(0.36,1.98)	0.706
Pressured sex				
Yes	1.07 (0.63, 1.80)	0.788	1.31(0.51,3.38)	0.566
Marital status				
Married	0.61 (0.46, 0.79)	<0.001*	1.0 (0.50,2.0)	0.995
Work status				
Working	0.57 (0.327, 1.00)	0.052	0.59(0.35, 0.98)	0.042
Marital status prior to age 18				

Married after 18years	0.43 (0.24, 0.78)	0.006	0.45(0.23,0.89)	0.022*
Not married	0.31 (0.18, 0.55)	<0.001*	0.28(0.10,0.75)	0.011*

Note: *Significant factor at 95% Confidence Interval

We ran a multivariate analysis to understand the association between low educational attainment before and after controlling for other variables, namely sex, sexual violence victimization, forms of sexual violence victimization, marital status, work status and child marriage. After controlling for all these, we found that child marriage was significantly associated with low education attainment ($P=0.011^*$). Also, in the adjusted model, those who experienced pressured sex were 1.3 times more likely to have low educational attainment compared to those who had not experienced pressured sex. Furthermore, those who experienced sexual violence victimization were 1.14 times more likely to have low educational attainment when compared to those who never experienced it.

Discussion

This paper aimed to understand the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment using the Uganda Violence Against Children Survey (2018). Educational attainment was measured as having primary and below as the highest level of education completed, while sexual violence victimization was measured according to its different forms. Our findings show that there is low educational attainment among the study population as the majority of the participants had primary and below as their highest level of educational attainment. This finding confirms the World Bank's (2018) profile for Uganda, which shows that 62% of the youth aged 15 to 24 years have primary and below as their highest level of education completed.

Notably, schooling is theorized as a key protective factor against violence against children (Behrman et al., 2017; Grant, 2012; Wodon et al., 2017). Given that the education levels are low; it signifies that a good number of children in Uganda could be missing out on the protective factor of education. Hence they are likely to experience violence including childhood sexual violence victimization. These findings indicate the need for actors working on improving enrollment and retention to reinforce their efforts as we draw closer to the goal deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals, one of which (SDG4) aspires to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all people.

In this study, attempted forced sex was significantly associated with low education attainment among females. There is not much literature to explain this association. However, some of the possible explanations could be aligned with the trauma theory. In this, attempted forced sex may cause tensions and anxieties among survivors which may make them unable to concentrate on their education hence low attainment. Frieze (2015) clarifies broadly about traumatic events and how they affect the survivors. These results thus imply the need to strengthen protective initiatives to guard girls against all forms of childhood sexual violence victimization including attempted forced sex given its significance in affecting educational attainment.

In the multivariate model, child marriage (before age 18) was also significantly associated with low education attainment. This is not surprising given the fact that most of the children who are married off are less likely to continue with school (Girls Not Brides, 2024). This implies the need to intensify efforts to guard children from child marriage to improve educational attainment.

Furthermore, the logistic regression model showed that survivors of pressured sex were likely to have low educational attainment when compared with those who never experienced this form of victimization. This still speaks to the need to enhance protection of children from all forms of sexual violence victimization including pressured sex if there is desire to improve education attainment. Indeed, this pressured sex if unchecked may progress to other forms of childhood sexual violence victimization.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This study provides an opportunity to examine the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low educational attainment among young people in a low income country. It also presents data on individual components of childhood sexual violence victimization and their association with low educational attainment, which is beneficial for prioritizing intervention programming. Due to the specificity of the VAC survey, we miss out on an opportunity to align our findings with other researchers who mostly lumped components of sexual violence victimization in their work. Our educational attainment was also based on being in school (enrollment), we never considered the issue of academic performance, class repetition, and other components of educational attainment, which should be examined further.

This analysis also never controlled for poverty, which is a key factor for low educational attainment. Relatedly, the study never controlled for accessing services among survivors of sexual violence victimization, which may also contribute to their continuation of schooling despite lifetime experiences of sexual violence. Future studies may consider exploring analysis in which all these factors are taken into account. We also did not control for other forms of violence (emotional and physical) which could also affect educational attainment. This is something further studies may consider exploring. Also this being a secondary sub group data analysis, we had a smaller sample hence other studies with bigger sample sizes are worth undertaking to understand deeply the association between childhood sexual violence victimization and low education attainment.

Recommendations

More research is needed to study education outcomes for survivors of childhood sexual violence beyond being in school, for example, their academic achievement in terms of grades. There is also a need for governments and practitioners in the child protection sector to work together to reduce the risk of sexual violence victimization. They can do this through scaling up programs which have been found effective in addressing violence in schools and communities, for example, the Good Schools' Toolkit. This has been proven to reduce violence against children in school can be adopted and scaled up in community settings. Such initiative can enhance children's awareness about their rights and reporting of sexual violence victimization acts such as, pressured sex, and attempted forced sex, among others, hence enabling the provision of services to reduce effects on educational attainment.

Ethical considerations

The authors were not required to attain ethical approval to undertake the secondary analysis because the Uganda VACS had received ethical approval from the Makerere University College of Health Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee, the Uganda National Council for Science

and Technology (UNCST), and the CDC Institutional Review Board. The authors accessed the data from The AfriChild Centre which is part of the data sharing agreement for the VACs data.

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Highlights for review

- The world has not yet achieved 100% enrollment for elementary education.
- The effect of sexual violence on low education attainment is under researched.
- Sexual violence is affecting over 25% of girls in Uganda.
- Physically forced sex and pressured sex are closely linked to low education attainment
- Sexual violence can potentially affect children's education attainment.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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