EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MANIPULATION DISCLOSURE FOR INSTAGRAM POSTS ON SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of digital manipulation disclosures on Instagram posts and how they influence the perceived source credibility and authenticity of social media influencers. With the proliferation of digital editing tools, the line between authentic and manipulated content is increasingly blurred, raising questions about trustworthiness and credibility in influencer marketing. This research explores how audience respond to manipulation disclosures and the effect of these disclosures on influencers' credibility. The study was guided by Source Credibility Theory. The study participants were 423 Instagram users sampled through crowd sourcing. The study utilized survey data collected from social media users using a structured online questionnaire. Data was analyzed using frequency and percentages, mean, standard deviation and chi-square. The study found that digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts is important for credibility and authenticity. The study also found that digital manipulation disclosure enhances Instagram users trust in the content shared by social media influencers. The study further found a significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram. Furthermore, the study found that when influencers disclose their use of digital manipulation, it increases Instagram users' interest in their content. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that Instagram as a social media platform should always promote standardized disclosure labels for digitally manipulated images as this will help users easily identify edited content as well as increase trust of influencers by Instagram users.

Keywords: Instagram, Social Media Influencers, Digital Manipulation Disclosure, Credibility, Authenticity

Introduction

Social media has transformed marketing and personal branding, with influencers becoming key players in product promotion and brand representation. Platforms like Instagram enable influencers to curate their public images, often using digital manipulation tools to enhance photos and videos.

While such manipulations may enhance aesthetics, they pose ethical concerns regarding authenticity and may lead to unrealistic portrayal of standards and lack of transparency (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). According to Campbell et al., (2023), the practice of picture manipulation is on the rise and gaining popularity within the advertising industry. Given the increasing awareness of digital manipulation, it is important that advertisements are authentic and their sources, credible. However, it remains unclear how these disclosures impact followers' perceptions of influencers credibility and authenticity.

It is worth noting that in recent times, the way social media users receive and act towards social media post is highly dependent on influencers and the content of the post. Thus, it is important that posts

are identified as advertised or paid commercial if it is. Boerman (2020) opined that the issue with influencer marketing is that commercial social media posts resemble and blend with non-commercial posts, and thus people often do not recognize it as advertising. Advertisers' interest in influencer marketing is growing rapidly, and they are spending increasingly more of their budgets on influencer marketing (Mediakix, 2019).

In these collaborations between influencers and brands, influencers function as brand ambassadors by creating sponsored content, mentioning the product or brand in picture captions or tags, or by sharing or being part of larger advertising campaigns and events (Cartwright et al., 2023). Gubalane and Ha (2023) emphasized the high impact influencers have on consumers and also the high reliance of consumers on these influencers for product which they promote.

Considering what social media influencers (SMIs) have become, in recent years, makes it important that research on the impact of disclosing digitally manipulated images showcased in social media influencer (SMI) sponsored content is carried out. Although SMIs receive compensation for their content, they wield significant persuasive power within their follower communities and are often perceived as honest product reviewers. Hence, SMI's perceived credibility are crucial elements of the persuasive mechanism behind influencer advertising. However, there is intense competition among content creators for users' attention on social media and this competition can drive unprecedented hype in order to get consumers attention for product promoted. Thus, it is important that digital manipulation disclosure is made for posts that are commercialized so that consumers are properly guided.

The rise of digital manipulation disclosure laws in several countries, such as Norway's France, Germany and the United Kingdom mandate for influencers to declare edited photos, exemplifies the push for transparency. Yet, while regulatory measures are in place, the responses to these disclosures vary, and their effects on credibility and perceived authenticity are under-researched. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how digital manipulation disclosures influence the perceived credibility and authenticity of social media influencers.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the popularity of digital manipulation on Instagram, limited research has been conducted on how disclosure of such modifications affects influencers' credibility and authenticity. While influencers aim to foster trust and relatability with their audience, digital manipulation can erode this trust if not properly disclosed. Several studies have been carried out on digital manipulation disclosure.

However, only few focused on source credibility and authenticity of social media influencers. By implication, there seems to be gap in literature as the most recent study by Mucundorfeanu et al., (2024) which focused on effectiveness of digital manipulation disclosure on source credibility and authenticity of Instagram posts. Again, the study ofMucundorfeanu et al., (2024) tested just hypotheses that addressed the issue under discourse. These gaps made it important to carry out the current study which is based on social media perception on the discourse under study.

Research Questions

1. What is the importance of digital manipulation disclosure on source credibility and authenticity of Instagram posts?
2. Is there a significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram?
3. What is the influence of digital manipulation disclosure on audience engagement and trust in social media influencers?

Literature Review

Digital Manipulation Disclosure

Digital manipulation disclosure refers to a way of informing consumers that an image has been altered and may not be a fair representation (Mucundorfeanu et al., 2024). Hendrickson (2024) explained that digital disclosures are important to uphold integrity prevent privacy violations. In this vein, digital disclosure can help protect consumers, especially young adults, from the potential risks of deceptive image editing.

Simply put, digital manipulation disclosures refer to statements or labels used to inform viewers that a digital image, video, or other media has been altered, modified, or enhanced. This is done to maintain transparency and allow viewers to understand that what they see may not reflect reality accurately. From another standpoint, digital manipulation disclosures are notifications or annotations that indicate the presence of editing or digital modification in media content.

These disclosures are often applied to counteract potential deceptive effects of digitally altered visuals on viewers, especially in advertisements, social media, and news reporting (McBride et al., 2019). In other words, digital manipulation disclosures encompass the practice of publicly stating or marking media that has undergone digital editing, highlighting aspects such as color correction, retouching, or object manipulation. This practice aims to improve media literacy and help audiences critically interpret digitally altered images or videos.

Social Media: Influence and Credibility

The role of social media influencers has expanded significantly in recent years as they are used for various media advertisement and promotion. Social media influence refers to the term that describes an individual's ability to affect other people's thinking in a social online community. Social media influence refers to the ability of individuals, groups, or brands to shape, alter, or guide the opinions, behaviours, and decisions of others through social media platforms.

This influence is often achieved through content creation, interaction, and engagement, as well as by building a loyal audience or following. Social media influence can impact various aspects of daily life, including purchasing habits, lifestyle choices, and cultural trends, and it is commonly used in marketing, politics, and social movements to reach and persuade targeted audiences.

According to Usman and Okafor (2019), social media influence is a phenomenon used to explain the change in an individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions that occurs at different levels because of social interaction between an individual and another individual or a group of individuals. It is worth noting that the more influence a person has, the more appeal that individual has to companies or other individuals who want to promote an idea or sell a product online. This makes them a top pick for companies. It also worth to note that the ability to influence on social media is tired to how credible an influencer is or the source of information been passed by the influencer.

Credibility in social media refers to the degree to which content, individuals, or brands on social media are perceived as trustworthy, reliable, and authoritative by their audience (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). According to Fogg et al. (2022), credibility is often established through transparency, consistency, expertise, and authenticity, as well as the quality and accuracy of the information shared.

Credible social media sources are more likely to be believed, shared, and followed, which is crucial in contexts like news dissemination, brand trust, influencer marketing, and public communication. Credibility in social media contexts also includes expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, elements that play a central role in the influence process (Coutinho et al., 2023). According to Belanche (2021), influencers gain credibility by presenting themselves as relatable and knowledgeable about the topics they

discuss. However, it is worth noting that the use of digital editing tools without digital manipulation disclosure can threaten credibility on social media.

Social Media: Digital Manipulation and Authenticity

Digital manipulation in social media refers to the alteration of content, including photos, videos, and messages, to present an idealized or exaggerated version of reality. This manipulation can take multiple forms, such as editing images to enhance physical appearance, using filters to create an aesthetically pleasing environment, or selecting only positive moments to share publicly (Ozimek et al., 2023).

Applications like Photoshop, Snapchat, and Instagram filters have made it easy for users to adjust their images, leading to what some experts call "the filtered self," where one's online identity may differ significantly from reality (Grindstaff et al., 2021). According to Wagner et al., (2021), digital manipulation is often motivated by a desire for approval and validation from peers and social media community. For instance, influencers, who rely on engagement for career success, often use photo-editing tools to maintain an idealized image, further intensifying the pressure on regular users to do the same.

Digital manipulation is not limited to individual users. Businesses and brands frequently use social media to promote products and services, sometimes employing deceptive tactics. Some companies engage in manipulative advertising strategies, such as digitally altering images to make products appear more appealing. This form of digital manipulation can mislead consumers, leading to unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction. Thus, the normalization of manipulated content on social media blurs the line between reality and fiction, influencing how users perceive and engage with the world.

Authenticity in social media refers to the honest and transparent presentation of oneself or a brand online. Authenticity involves sharing unfiltered moments, acknowledging imperfections, and resisting the urge to manipulate one's online persona for validation. In recent years, there has been a growing demand for authentic content, as users become increasingly aware of the potential for manipulation and seek genuine connections (Kapitan et al., 2021, Owe et al., 2023).

The #nofilter movement, which encourages users to post unedited photos, and the rise of platforms like BeReal, which restricts the use of filters, reflect this trend (Shauna, 2022). However, maintaining authenticity on social media presents challenges. The competitive environment on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where users often feel pressure to post polished content, can make authenticity difficult to sustain. Users may be reluctant to share unfiltered moments due to fear of judgment or rejection. This phenomenon known as context collapse occurs when different aspects of a user's life converge on social media, making it challenging to present a single, authentic self (Borkovich & Breese, 2016). Consequently, authenticity becomes a complex and multi-layered concept, influenced by personal, social, and platform-related factors.

In conclusion, digital manipulation has become a common practice, especially on visual-centric platforms like Instagram. Studies have shown that overly manipulated images contribute to unrealistic standards and decrease perceived authenticity (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). In response, many users seek more authentic representations, valuing influencers who are open about modifications made to their images. This transparency, some researchers argue, can enhance an influencer's authenticity, aligning with the preferences of modern audiences who value honesty and relatability (Pöyry et al., 2019).

Empirical Studies

Mucundorfeanu et al., (2024) in investigating how disclosures about digitally manipulated images affect perceptions of social media influencers (SMIs) and related brand attitudes. Across two experiments, finds

that recognizing digital manipulation does not impact the perceived authenticity of SMIs. However, for users highly involved with the product, recognizing manipulation decreases the perceived credibility of the SMI. Additionally, the presence of clear, visually prominent disclosures on sponsored posts can influence brand attitudes and engagement intentions, although the effects vary based on product involvement levels.

Ardley et al., (2023) explored factors that make a social media influencer (SMI) appear authentic when endorsing products on Instagram. Using focus groups, the research identified four key elements forming an authentic influencer model: trustworthiness (alignment between the influencers and brand's values), transparency (openness about paid partnerships), relatability (connection between influencer and consumer), and expertise (knowledge about the product).

Sesar et al., (2022) examined the growing significance of influencer marketing in digital advertising, particularly post-pandemic, where consumers increasingly rely on influencers for product information. The analysis revealed that traits associated with influencer credibility positively influence customers' purchase intentions. However, the impact of advertising disclosure on purchase intentions is more variable. Overall, the findings of the study underscore the importance of both credibility and transparency in shaping consumer purchasing behavior in the context of influencer marketing.

Saternus et al., (2022) in exploring how the intensity of Instagram (IG) usage moderates the impact of advertisement disclosure types on advertising performance, found that that using "#ad" disclosures enhance the trustworthiness of influencers and the credibility of posts for heavy users, but not for light users. Additionally, having a strong following significantly boosts various advertising performance metrics, including attitudes toward product placement and trust in the spokesperson.

Balaban et al., (2021) in investigating the impact of different types of advertising disclosures on consumers' behavioral outcomes found that brand-specific disclosures positively influence both purchase intention and intention toward the SMI, primarily through enhancing the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI. This indicates that clearer disclosures can effectively activate conceptual persuasion knowledge and foster more favorable consumer responses.

There is a significant gap in literature that the present study filled compare to the reviewed studies. For instance, Mucundorfeanu et al. (2024) explore how disclosures affect perceptions of influencers and brand attitudes, revealing that while authenticity remains unaffected, credibility decreases for highly involved users which is different in scope from the present study.

Ardley et al. (2023) on the other hand, shifted focus to influencer authenticity, identifying trustworthiness, transparency, relatability, and expertise as key factors. Sesar et al. (2022) analysed influencer credibility's role in purchase decisions, noting that disclosure effects vary. Saternus et al. (2022) examined Instagram usage intensity, finding that disclosure boosts trust for heavy users but not light users. Balaban et al. (2021) emphasized disclosure's role in enhancing consumer trust and purchase intent. Thus, while the present study centers on credibility and authenticity, the reviewed works explore broader influencer marketing dynamics, including brand attitudes, purchase behaviour, and disclosure effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

Source Credibility Theory

The theoretical underpinning of this study is Source Credibility Theory developed by Hovland and Weiss in 1951 (Hovland et al., 1953). The major assumption of this theory is that people are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible (Hovland et al., 1953). According to Hovland and colleagues, individual's credibility influences how audiences receive and perceive messages, with two main components affecting credibility: trustworthiness and expertise.

In relation to the present study on Instagram and digital manipulation disclosure, the theory assume that audiences are increasingly critical of images and content that appear edited. Thus, by revealing the use of digital manipulation, influencers may impact perceptions of their trustworthiness and authenticity (Balaban et al., 2022). Disclosure of digital manipulation can affect how followers perceive the influencer's transparency and honesty, two factors that are critical for source credibility. When influencers are transparent about digital enhancements, followers may view them as more authentic and trustworthy, boosting their credibility. Conversely, if influencers do not disclose edits, they may be perceived as deceptive, potentially damaging their perceived authenticity.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design. Thus, questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. The participants for the study were gathered through crowd sourcing from prominent influencers page on Instagram who must have experienced digital manipulation disclosure and have knowledge about it. Also, Instagram ad was used to expand the reach of the questionnaire for diverse opinion from Instagram users.

The participants consisted of 423 participants who willingly partook in the online survey distributed via Google form. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using the test-retest method. Additionally, its internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics, which yielded a coefficient value of 0.75, indicating that the instrument was reliable. Data collected for the study were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Thus, simple percentages, mean, standard and chi-square was used in analyzing the data collected for the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question 1: What is the importance of digital manipulation disclosure on source credibility and authenticity of Instagram posts?

Table 1: Respondents' views on the level of important of digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Very important	117	27.66
Important	202	47.75
Unimportant	104	24.59
Total	**423**	**100**

Table 1 shows that 27.66% of the respondents sees digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts as very important, 47.75 sees digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts as important while 24.59 see disclosure of digital manipulation on Instagram posts as unimportant. This data shows that majority of the study participants sees digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts as important.

Table 2: Mean score and standard deviation of the importance of digital manipulation disclosure on source credibility and authenticity

Source Credibility	Mean	Std. Deviation
Digital manipulation disclosure enhances my trust in the content shared by social media influencers.	3.54	1.86
Knowing that an image has been digitally manipulated decreases my confidence in the influencer's credibility.	2.04	0.73
I find influencers who disclose digital manipulation in their posts to be more trustworthy.	3.62	1.96
Digital manipulation makes it harder for me to judge the reliability of the information shared by influencers.	3.27	1.48
Source Authenticity		
When influencers disclose digital manipulation, I perceive them as more authentic.	3.43	1.76
Knowing that an image has been digitally edited reduces my perception of the influencer's authenticity.	2.11	1.64
I am more likely to view an influencer as genuine if they are transparent about digital alterations in their posts.	3.76	0.97
Digital manipulation decreases the authenticity of the influencer's self-presentation.	2.09	1.72

Table 2 shows respondents' perceptions on how digital manipulation disclosure influences the credibility and authenticity of social media influencers, rated on a 4-point Likert scale.

For source credibility, the mean scores reveal that respondents moderately agree that disclosure of digital manipulation enhances trust (mean = 3.54) and find influencers who are transparent more trustworthy (mean = 3.62), though views vary, as seen in the higher standard deviations (1.86 and 1.96, respectively). However, they generally disagree that digital manipulation reduces confidence in credibility (mean = 2.04) with less variability (SD = 0.73), and they only moderately agree that manipulation complicates reliability judgments (mean = 3.27).

For source authenticity, respondents generally agree that disclosure boosts authenticity perception (mean = 3.43) and are more likely to view influencers as genuine when they are transparent (mean = 3.76), with the latter showing more consistent responses (SD = 0.97). In contrast, they disagree that digital editing reduces authenticity (mean = 2.11) or self-presentation (mean = 2.09), though opinions on these are more varied, indicated by higher standard deviations (1.64 and 1.72). Overall, the findings suggest a moderate belief that disclosure of digital manipulation positively impacts both perceived credibility and authenticity, though there is some divergence in individual views.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram?

Table 3: Chi-square test of significance between digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram

Exposure to digital manipulation disclosure	Perceive authenticity		
	Authentic	**Not authentic**	**Total**
Exposed	252 (59.57%)	59 (13.95%)	**311**
Not exposed	75 (17.73%)	37 (8.75%)	**112**
Total	**327**	**96**	**423**

x²= 8.50, df= 1, p= .0036, cvv= .142

Since the p-value (0.0036) is less than the common significance level of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram. Exposure to digital manipulation disclosure likely influences whether influencers are perceived as authentic or not.

However, the Cramér's V value of 0.142 suggests a weak to moderate association between the two variables. This means that while there is a statistically significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity, the strength of that relationship is relatively weak.

Research Question 3: What is the influence of digital manipulation disclosure on audience engagement and trust in social media influencers?

Table 4: Mean score and standard deviation of the influence of digital manipulation disclosure on audience engagement and trust in social media influencers

Audience Engagement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Digital manipulation enhances the visual appeal of social media posts, making them more engaging.	4.3	1.89
When influencers disclose their use of digital manipulation, it increases my interest in their content.	3.74	1.26
I am more likely to engage (like, comment, share) with posts that I know have been digitally manipulated.	3.56	0.66
The use of digital manipulation in influencer posts motivates me to follow them on social media.	3.31	1.43
Trust in Influencer		
I trust influencers more when they are transparent about their use of digital manipulation.	4.52	1.54

Digital manipulation makes me question the authenticity of the content shared by influencers.	4.32	1.73
Influencers who do not disclose digital manipulation lose my trust over time.	4.59	1.33
The perceived trustworthiness of an influencer is affected by their use of digital manipulation in posts.	4.24	1.32

The data in Table 4 presents the mean scores and standard deviations regarding the influence of digital manipulation disclosure on audience engagement and trust in social media influencers. For audience engagement, respondents expressed a strong belief that digital manipulation enhances the visual appeal of social media posts, achieving the highest mean score of 4.3, coupled with a relatively high standard deviation of 1.89, indicating some variability in responses.

When influencers disclose their use of digital manipulation, there is a notable increase in interest, reflected by a mean score of 3.74 and a standard deviation of 1.26. The likelihood of engaging with digitally manipulated posts is moderately favorable, with a mean score of 3.56 and a low standard deviation of 0.66, suggesting more consistent responses. However, the motivation to follow influencers based on digital manipulation drops to a mean score of 3.31, alongside a standard deviation of 1.43, indicating greater divergence in opinions.

In terms of trust, the data indicates a robust preference for transparency regarding digital manipulation, with the highest mean score of 4.52. This is supported by a standard deviation of 1.54, reflecting a moderate range of opinions. Additionally, the concern about authenticity due to digital manipulation also ranks high, with a mean score of 4.32 and a higher standard deviation of 1.73, suggesting varied perceptions among respondents. Trust is further emphasized, as influencers who fail to disclose their use of digital manipulation receive a mean score of 4.59, indicating a strong sentiment that non-disclosure negatively affects trust, accompanied by a standard deviation of 1.33.

Finally, the perceived trustworthiness influenced by digital manipulation in posts shows a mean score of 4.24, with a standard deviation of 1.32, underscoring the significant role of disclosure in shaping audience trust. Overall, the data suggests that digital manipulation disclosure significantly impacts both audience engagement and trust in social media influencers, with transparency being a key factor in maintaining credibility.

Discussion of Findings

The study, firstly, found that digital manipulation disclosure on Instagram posts is important for credibility and authenticity. The study also found that digital manipulation disclosure enhances Instagram users trust in the content shared by social media influencers. The study again found that influencers who disclose digital manipulation is seen as trustworthy by Instagram users.

This finding supports the finding of Ardley et al., (2023) who found that transparency as an element of trust influencer model. The study further shows that digital manipulation makes it harder for social media users to judge the reliability of the information shared by influencers. Based on the importance of digital manipulation disclosure on authenticity, the study found that when influencers disclose digital manipulation, they are seen as more authentic by Instagram users. This finding supports the finding of Saternus et al., (2022) who found that disclosures enhance the trustworthiness of influencers and the credibility of posts. The study also found that Instagram users are likely to view influencers as genuine if they are transparent about digital alterations in their posts.

The study secondly found that there is a significant relationship between exposure to digital manipulation disclosure and perceived authenticity of influencers on Instagram. That is, exposure to digital manipulation disclosure likely influences whether influencers are perceived as authentic or not. This finding contradicts the findings of Mucundorfeanu et al., (2024) who found that recognizing digital manipulation does not impact the perceived authenticity of SMIs

Thirdly, the study found that digital manipulation enhances the visual appeal of social media posts, making them more engaging to Instagram users. The study also found that when influencers disclose their use of digital manipulation, it increases Instagram users' interest in their content. This finding supports the finding of Sesar et al., (2022) who found that credibility and transparency is important in shaping engagement in the context of influencer marketing. The study further found that Instagram users are more likely to engage (i.e., like, comment, share) with posts that they are aware have been digitally manipulated. Furthermore, the study found that the use of digital manipulation in influencer posts motivates Instagram users to follow them on social media.

This finding aligns with Source Credibility Theory, which posits that credibility influences persuasion. Digital manipulation in influencer posts according to the theory, may enhance aesthetics, attracting followers who associate polished content with expertise. Thus, credibility hinges on trustworthiness and transparency.

As shown by the findings of the current study, if influencers disclose digital edits, they may be perceived as honest, strengthening their credibility (Balaban et al., 2022). Conversely, non-disclosure risks diminishing trust. Thus, while digital manipulation can motivate Instagram users to follow influencers, its impact on long-term engagement depends on whether followers perceive the influencer as authentic or deceptive, reinforcing Source Credibility Theory's emphasis on source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953).

Conclusion

The study concludes that digital manipulation disclosure plays a crucial role in shaping followers' perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity on Instagram. The study also concludes that transparency fosters trust and enhance influencers' credibility. As such, social media influencers must carefully balance the aesthetic demands of social media with the growing call for authenticity and transparency.

Recommendations

Based on its findings, the researchers recommend that

1. Instagram as a social media platform should always promote standardized disclosure labels for digitally manipulated images as this will help users easily identify edited content as well as increase trust of influencers by Instagram users.
2. Influencers should be guided on how to effectively communicate transparency without diminishing their appeal, balancing honesty with curated aesthetics.
3. Instagram, should launch educational campaigns such as webinars to inform users about the effects of digital manipulation and the significance of disclosure as these initiatives can empower individuals to make informed judgments about the authenticity and trustworthiness of influencer content.

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