Understanding, Use, and Intentionality vis–a–vis Creative Spaces of Selected Chinese Art Educators Enrolled as Graduate Students in Manila

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Abstract: This study aimed to unveil the understanding, use, and intentionality of selected Chinese graduate students in Manila vis-a-vis creative spaces. Nine art education graduate students from different provinces in Mainland China and enrolled in a university in Manila were invited to answer a 3-item online open-ended survey through Google Forms about their understanding, use, and intentionality vis-a-vis creative spaces post-COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses were thematically- and cross-analyzed by the researcher. The results revealed that the participants' understanding and intentionality regarding creative spaces after the COVID-19 pandemic reflect resilience theory's principles of adaptation, resourcefulness, and community support. They recognize creative spaces as essential environments for fostering innovation, collaboration, and emotional well-being, aligning with the idea that supportive environments facilitate adaptation and recovery during crises. Their intentional use of creative spaces involves adapting to challenges, prioritizing safety, and leveraging technology to maintain engagement and connection. This proactive approach resonates with resilience theory's emphasis on flexibility and proactive strategies for coping with adversity. By deliberately designing and utilizing creative spaces to stimulate creativity, promote collaboration, and support well-being, individuals and communities enhance their resilience and ability to navigate future challenges effectively.

Keywords: Creative spaces, Intentionality, Understanding, Chinese graduate students, Art educators

I.   Introduction

Creative spaces encompass physical or virtual environments intentionally designed to cultivate creativity, innovation, and collaboration (Cartwright, 2017). These spaces, whether physical offices, studios, or digital platforms, are curated to inspire individuals to ideate freely and engage in creative expression, Cartwright explained. They often feature flexible layouts, comfortable furnishings, and resources such as art supplies or technology tools to support brainstorming and collaboration (Samsonova & Kim, 2023). Additionally, creative spaces can manifest as artistic communities, incubators, or public spaces, providing a supportive environment for individuals to exchange ideas, receive feedback, and collaborate on projects across various disciplines (Gendeshmin, Khanghahi, &Rostamzadeh, 2023). In essence, these spaces serve as catalysts for nurturing creativity, fostering collaboration, and driving innovation in diverse fields and communities. Creative spaces play a significant role in shaping the quality of life for humans by providing environments that foster personal growth, community engagement, and overall well-being (Gendeshmin, Khanghahi, &Rostamzadeh, 2023).

Additionally, creative spaces often promote learning and skill development, empowering individuals to acquire new knowledge and abilities (Thoring et al., 2020). This can lead to personal and professional growth, opening up opportunities for career advancement and economic prosperity (Cao, 2019). Furthermore, creative spaces contribute to the cultural vibrancy of communities, enriching people's lives through artistic expression, cultural events, and public engagement (Gendeshmin, Khanghahi, &Rostamzadeh, 2023). Overall, the value of creative spaces lies in their ability to inspire creativity, nurture social connections, foster personal development, and enhance the overall quality of life for individuals and communities alike.

COVID-19 profoundly reshaped our experiences of physical spaces by introducing new considerations for safety, hygiene, and social distancing (Varoutsos, 2023). Public spaces such as offices, restaurants, schools, and recreational areas underwent significant transformations to mitigate the spread of the virus. Measures such as mask mandates, capacity limits, and increased sanitation became commonplace, altering the way people interacted within these spaces (OECD, 2020). Remote work became prevalent, leading to a reevaluation of traditional office spaces and a greater reliance on virtual communication platforms (Battisti, Alfiero, Leonidou, 2022).

Additionally, the pandemic highlighted disparities in access to safe and adequate spaces, with marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by overcrowded or inadequate living conditions (Dubey et al., 2022). Furthermore, COVID-19 accelerated existing trends such as the digitization of services and the rise of e-commerce, changing how people interacted with commercial spaces and prompting a shift towards contactless transactions (Popov, A. 2021).

Overall, the pandemic fundamentally altered people's perceptions and usage of physical spaces, emphasizing the importance of adaptability, resilience, and public health considerations in shaping our built environment. Initially, many physical creative spaces such as art studios, theaters, and coworking spaces faced closures or restrictions due to public health measures (Brooks & Patel, 2022). This led to a shift towards virtual platforms for creative collaboration, with artists, designers, and creators leveraging technology to connect and share their work remotely (OECD, 2020). Virtual exhibitions, online workshops, and digital performances became increasingly popular, allowing creative communities to maintain engagement and reach wider audiences despite physical limitations (AIContentfy team, 2023).

Furthermore, some physical creative spaces adapted by implementing safety measures such as reduced capacities, spaced-out workstations, and enhanced sanitation protocols to facilitate safe in-person interactions (Hogarty, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic prompted a reevaluation of the role and function of creative spaces, with a greater emphasis on flexibility, adaptability, and inclusivity (Howe et al., 2021). Many creative organizations and initiatives also emerged to support artists and creatives during challenging times, providing resources, funding, and virtual networking opportunities (Shaughnessy et al., 2023). Overall, while COVID-19 presented significant challenges for creative spaces, it also catalyzed innovation and adaptation, leading to the exploration of new models and approaches to fostering creativity and collaboration in a post-pandemic world.

COVID-19 and the use of creative spaces by the Chinese

The use of creative spaces plays a significant role in shaping the lifestyle of individuals in mainland China by providing avenues for self-expression, community engagement, and personal development (Jiang, 2024). Creative spaces such as art studios, coworking spaces, and cultural centers serve as hubs for artistic expression, fostering creativity and innovation among Chinese residents (Li & Kovacs, 2021). These spaces offer opportunities for individuals to explore their interests, develop new skills, and collaborate with like-minded peers, enriching their lifestyles and enhancing their overall well-being (Cartwright, 2017).

Moreover, creative spaces often host a variety of events, workshops, and exhibitions, providing platforms for cultural exchange and social interaction. By participating in these activities, individuals can expand their social networks, cultivate meaningful relationships, and contribute to the vibrant cultural scene in China (Li & Kovacs, 2021). Additionally, the use of digital creative spaces, such as online forums and virtual communities, allows individuals to connect with others regardless of geographic location, further enriching their lifestyle and expanding their horizons (Henthorn, 2016). Overall, the use of creative spaces plays a vital role in shaping the dynamic and diverse lifestyle of individuals in mainland China, providing opportunities for personal growth, social connection, and cultural enrichment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China, strict government-imposed measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus significantly altered citizens' daily lives and interactions within physical spaces (Li & Lu, 2020). Lockdowns and quarantine measures confined people to their homes, limiting access to public spaces and amenities. Social distancing and mask mandates were enforced in supermarkets, parks, and public transportation, reshaping social dynamics and shared spaces. Extensive contact tracing and surveillance measures were implemented using digital technology to monitor public spaces and enforce health protocols.

Likewise, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies for remote work, online education, and virtual social interactions, minimizing physical contact. Despite these challenges (Lee et al., 2021), Chinese communities demonstrated resilience and solidarity through mutual aid initiatives, volunteer efforts, and adherence to public health guidelines, mitigating the impact of the pandemic on individuals' experiences of space (Miao, Schwartz, & Schwartz, 2021). Overall, the pandemic in mainland China brought about a combination of government restrictions, digital transformation, and community resilience, shaping interactions within physical and virtual spaces to navigate the crisis effectively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese exhibited remarkable creativity in managing their spaces by implementing innovative solutions to overcome the challenges brought by the virus (Hofreiter et al., 2021). They organized virtual events like concerts, exhibitions, and group activities, fostering community engagement while adhering to social distancing measures (Lei & Li, 2020). To accommodate outdoor activities while maintaining social distancing, cities creatively repurposed public spaces, transforming streets into pedestrian zones and organizing open-air markets (Fang & Yoshimura, 2023). Companies implemented flexible work arrangements and virtual team-building activities to support remote work (Zhang, 2022), while artists and designers raised awareness through creative campaigns and installations (Vecco et al., 2022). Retailers adapted physical spaces, implementing contactless payments and redesigning layouts for safety (Zhong & Moon, 2022). Thus, these innovative approaches not only mitigated the virus's impact but also promoted unity and solidarity within Chinese communities.

Study Framework

One theory that can help explain the understanding and use of creative spaces during disasters is the concept of resilience theory. Resilience theory, originating from ecological and psychological research, and developed by several researchers, including Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, Michael Rutter, and Ann Masten (Shean, 2015), focuses on understanding how individuals, communities, and systems adapt and thrive in the face of adversity or disruption. Applied to the context of creative spaces during disasters, resilience theory emphasizes the importance of flexibility, resourcefulness, and adaptability in responding to crises.

During disasters, creative spaces serve as essential hubs for resilience-building activities, providing a platform for individuals and communities to come together, share resources, and collaborate on solutions. These spaces become focal points for creativity, innovation, and problem-solving, enabling people to adapt to changing circumstances and overcome challenges.

Resilience theory suggests that creative spaces play a crucial role in promoting psychological well-being and social cohesion during disasters by providing opportunities for self-expression, emotional support, and collective action. By fostering a sense of community and empowerment, these spaces help individuals and communities navigate uncertainty and build resilience in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, resilience theory highlights the importance of adaptive capacity in responding to disasters. Creative spaces offer environments where individuals can experiment, learn, and develop new skills, contributing to their ability to adapt to changing conditions and recover from setbacks.

As such, resilience theory provides a framework for understanding how creative spaces function as dynamic and adaptive systems that contribute to resilience-building efforts during disasters. By fostering creativity, collaboration, and innovation, these spaces play a vital role in helping individuals and communities not only survive but also thrive in the aftermath of crises.

II.   Methodology

Nine art education graduate students from different provinces in Mainland China and enrolled in a university in Manila were invited to answer a 3-item English online open-ended survey through Google Forms about their understanding, use, and intentionality vis-a-vis creative spaces post-COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses were repeatedly read to arrive at insights prior to coding. Later they were thematically-analyzed and qualitative data sets were cross-analyzed by the researcher to arrive at deeper knowledge of the interconnections between understanding, use, and intentionality vis-a-vis creative spaces by selected Chinese art educators.

III.   Results

Understanding of creative spaces post-COVID-19 pandemic

Based on the responses provided, several themes emerge regarding the understanding of creative spaces post-COVID-19 pandemic:

Definition of Creative Space. The informants generally define creative spaces as environments specifically crafted to inspire innovation, creativity, and collaboration. These spaces are characterized by their physical layout, ambiance, and community support. One informant wrote: "A creative space is an environment designed to inspire innovation, creativity, and collaboration..."

Purpose and Function. Creative spaces are seen as places where individuals can freely think, explore, and create without external interference. They provide an atmosphere conducive to concentration, allowing individuals to improve their work efficiency and fully utilize their talents. This was drawn from a statement saying, "...This space allows us to better improve our concentration, give full play to our talents, and improve our work efficiency."

Variety of Spaces. Creative spaces can encompass a wide range of physical and virtual environments, including offices, studios, cafes, maker spaces, and digital platforms. Regardless of the setting, the primary purpose remains to stimulate creativity and innovation as was previously established. This was pointed out by the following response: "...Creative space refers to a place that can stimulate our creativity. This place can be an office, a studio, a cafe and so on..."

Features of Creative Spaces. Creative spaces are designed to be inspirational, comfortable, and open, providing a positive environment for individuals to unleash their creativity. They often feature "ample natural light, specialized equipment, and storage for art supplies" to support various creative endeavors.

Activities and Engagement. Within creative spaces, individuals can engage in a variety of activities aimed at fostering creativity, such as cooperation, communication, learning, and experimentation. These activities enable individuals to challenge themselves, collaborate with others, and pursue creative projects and ideas. This corresponds to what one informant shared: "...In such a space, people can freely think, explore and create, unfettered to play their imagination."

Community and Support. Creative spaces facilitate collaboration, communication, and learning among individuals (as stated above), creating opportunities for community engagement and support. They serve as hubs where people can exchange ideas, receive feedback, and work together on creative endeavors. One informant supported this when he/she wrote; "... in the creative space, people can constantly challenge themselves through cooperation, communication, learning and trying..."

These themes and quotations collectively reflect a comprehensive understanding of creative spaces and their significance in fostering creativity, collaboration, and innovation.

COVID-19 and changes in the use of creative spaces

Based on the responses provided, several themes emerge regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the utilization of creative spaces:

Shift from Physical to Virtual Environments. The pandemic necessitated a shift from physical to virtual creative spaces, emphasizing digital collaboration and remote work. This transition was driven by the need for social distancing and restrictions on physical gatherings. The following responses support this:

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted creative spaces from physical to virtual environments, emphasizing digital collaboration and remote work.

With the need for social distancing and restrictions on physical gatherings, many creative spaces have shifted to virtual platforms.

Consideration of Safety and Efficiency. Companies re-evaluated office space layouts and strategies to reduce overcrowding, prioritizing employee safety and efficiency in the workplace. Participants underscored this when they answered:

Companies are re-planning office space layouts and developing new office space strategies to reduce overcrowding in offices. This way, employees can work safely and efficiently.

Working from home, virtual meetings, and cloud storage are the latest trends to ensure employee safety and normal office operations.

Incorporation of Emotional Elements. There is an increased recognition of the importance of emotional elements in creative spaces, with a focus on providing support and strength through art during global crises. Hence, one participant said:

The outbreak of COVID-19 has made me realize that in the face of global disasters, people's emotions need more attention and love. When using creative space, we need to incorporate emotional elements into the creation and pass on more strength and support to people through warmer and hopeful works of art.

Acceleration of Digital Technologies. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, leading to changes in office design and the utilization of virtual tools for creative collaboration. Hence, the following statements emerged:

The trend of office design will continue to change over time, and you must adjust your office to keep up with the trend, especially in terms of health and safety.

While the pandemic posed challenges, it also accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and showcased the resilience and adaptability of creative spaces in fostering collaboration and innovation in the virtual realm.

Potential for Expansion and Innovation. Some respondents saw the pandemic as an opportunity for creative spaces to expand into broader and more boundaryless realms, leveraging technologies such as VR and AR. As such, one informant pointed out:

After the pandemic, everything changed to online, and with the development of VR and AR, the creative space could be a larger and boundaryless space.

These themes and quotations illustrate the multifaceted ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the utilization of creative spaces, prompting shifts towards virtual environments, re-evaluation of physical spaces, and exploration of new technologies and approaches to creativity and collaboration.

Intentionality in the use of creative spaces for young people

Based on the responses provided, several themes emerge regarding the intentionality of designing creative spaces for the benefit of young people:

Deliberate Planning and Layout. Respondents emphasize the importance of deliberate planning in designing spaces that inspire and engage young people. This includes creating open and flexible layouts that encourage social interaction and creative collaboration. This was elaborated by two informants:

Designing spaces for young people's creativity involves deliberate planning to incorporate elements that inspire, engage, and foster an innovative mindset.

First of all, rational planning of space layout is the key to improving social interaction and creative cooperation among young people.

Incorporation of Attractive Elements. Intentional design involves incorporating attractive elements such as large screens, projectors, and inspiring walls to stimulate creativity and encourage participation in social activities and workshops. A couple of answers pointed this out:

… adding some attractive elements can increase the activity of social interaction and creative collaboration.

For example, setting up a large screen or projector in a public space can provide young people with the opportunity to display their works and share their creativity.

Technological Integration. Intentional design also involves leveraging technology to provide convenience and assistance, facilitating social interaction and creative cooperation among young people. Thus, the following responses were expressed:

Finally, use technological means to provide convenience and assistance to further promote social interaction and creative cooperation among young people.

Design a special social interaction platform or online forum to make it easier for young people to share their ideas, find partners, and participate in various social activities.

Responsibility of Artists and Designers. Some respondents emphasize the responsibility of artists and designers in designing spaces to stimulate creativity in young people, highlighting the importance of incorporating historical and cultural elements. As such, the responses below are relevant:

In terms of designing spaces to stimulate young people's creativity, I think this is the responsibility of artists.

I would like to share more history and culture to enlighten the creativity. Because I always find the inspiration in the historic pieces.

Engagement and Collaboration. Intentional design aims to promote collaboration and networking among young people with similar interests, fostering an environment where they can share ideas, find partners, and participate in various activities. This was underscored by the following answers:

Our design principles revolve around providing open and flexible spaces that support diverse creative activities, such as art, music, coding, and hands-on experimentation.

We incorporate features like vibrant colors, natural lighting, interactive elements, and versatile furniture to inspire imagination and foster a playful atmosphere.

These themes and quotations collectively highlight the intentional efforts of the informants in creating spaces that stimulate creativity in young people, emphasizing the importance of thoughtful planning, engagement, collaboration, and integration of technology and cultural elements.

Understanding of and intentionality is the use of creative spaces after COVID-19

The respondents' understanding of creative spaces significantly influences their use of these spaces during the pandemic, shaping how they adapt, innovate, and prioritize safety while fostering creativity and collaboration. Their understanding translates into several key considerations for use.

Shift to Virtual Environments. Recognizing the importance of inspiring innovation and fostering collaboration, respondents adapt their use of creative spaces by shifting from physical to virtual environments. They leverage digital platforms and technologies to continue engaging with creative activities, ensuring continuity despite physical restrictions.

Prioritizing Safety. Understanding creative spaces as environments that inspire and engage, respondents prioritized safety during the pandemic. They implemented measures such as rational planning of space layouts, incorporating elements to promote physical distancing, and integrating technology to facilitate remote collaboration while ensuring the well-being of participants.

Innovative Solutions. Building on their understanding of creative spaces as adaptable and supportive of diverse needs, respondents developed innovative solutions to maintain engagement and foster creativity during the pandemic. They created virtual workshops, online exhibitions, and digital collaboration platforms, demonstrating resilience and creativity in overcoming challenges.

Community Engagement. Emphasizing the importance of social interaction and collaboration, respondents leveraged creative spaces to maintain community engagement during the pandemic. They organized virtual events, social activities, and collaborative projects to foster connection and support among participants, demonstrating the continued relevance and impact of creative spaces in fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration.

Empathy and Support. Understanding the emotional needs of individuals during global crises, informants incorporated elements of empathy and support into their use of creative spaces. They created opportunities for emotional expression, reflection, and connection, leveraging creative activities to provide solace, inspiration, and strength during challenging times.

Overall, the respondents' understanding of creative spaces influences their use during the pandemic by guiding them to adapt, prioritize safety, innovate, engage with communities, and provide support, ensuring that creative spaces continue to inspire, empower, and connect individuals even in times of crisis.

Use of creative spaces during the pandemic and intentionality of use post-pandemic

The changes in the use of creative spaces during the pandemic are closely related to the intentions behind using such spaces, as they reflect a shift in priorities, strategies, and approaches to fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Here's how these changes align with the intentions in using creative spaces:

Adaptation to Circumstances. The pandemic necessitated a shift from physical to virtual environments, leading to changes in the use of creative spaces. Despite this shift, the underlying intentions remained consistent: to inspire innovation, engage participants, and foster collaboration. Informants adapted their use of creative spaces to continue fulfilling these intentions in a virtual context, leveraging digital platforms and technologies to maintain engagement and connection.

Prioritizing Safety and Well-being. The changes in the use of creative spaces during the pandemic reflect an intention to prioritize safety and well-being. Informants implemented measures to ensure the safety of participants, such as rational planning of space layouts, integration of physical distancing measures, and promotion of remote collaboration. These changes align with the intention to create environments that inspire creativity while ensuring the health and safety of individuals.

Innovation and Resilience. The pandemic prompted informants to innovate and adapt their use of creative spaces to overcome challenges and maintain engagement. By developing virtual workshops, online exhibitions, and digital collaboration platforms, respondents demonstrated resilience and creativity in achieving their intentions despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic. The changes in the use of creative spaces reflect an intention to continue fostering creativity, connection, and community engagement in innovative ways.

Community Engagement and Support. Despite the physical distancing measures, respondents remained committed to fostering community engagement and support through creative spaces. They organized virtual events, social activities, and collaborative projects to maintain connection and provide solace, inspiration, and strength to participants. These changes in the use of creative spaces align with the intention to create environments that foster a sense of belonging, connection, and support, even in times of crisis.

Thus, the changes in the use of creative spaces during the pandemic are consistent with the intentions behind using such spaces, as they reflect a continued commitment to inspiring creativity, promoting collaboration, prioritizing safety and well-being, fostering innovation and resilience, and engaging with communities to provide support and connection.

Understanding of and intentionality in the use of creative spaces post-pandemic

The relationship between the participants' understanding and intentionality regarding creative spaces after the pandemic is crucial in shaping the future utilization and design of these spaces.

Understanding of Creative Spaces Post-Pandemic. Participants' understanding of creative spaces post-pandemic reflects a recognition of the enduring importance of these spaces in fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement. They acknowledge the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by creative spaces during the pandemic, as well as the continued need for environments that inspire innovation and support well-being. Additionally, participants may have gained new insights into the potential of virtual platforms and digital technologies for creative expression and collaboration, leading to a more expansive understanding of creative spaces beyond physical environments.

Intentionality in Utilization of Creative Spaces Post-Pandemic. Building on their understanding, participants demonstrated intentionality in utilizing creative spaces post-pandemic to address emerging needs and challenges. They may prioritize creating flexible and adaptable spaces that accommodate both physical and virtual interactions, reflecting an awareness of the importance of resilience and versatility in responding to future disruptions. Additionally, participants may intentionally leverage technology to enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and engagement within creative spaces, recognizing the potential of digital platforms to facilitate global collaboration and community building.

Relationship Between Understanding and Intentionality. The relationship between participants' understanding and intentionality lies in their ability to translate insights and knowledge into actionable strategies for designing, utilizing, and sustaining creative spaces post-pandemic. Participants' understanding of the enduring value of creative spaces informs their intentionality in prioritizing resources, designing layouts, and implementing practices that foster creativity, collaboration, and well-being. Moreover, participants' intentional utilization of creative spaces reflects a proactive approach to addressing evolving needs and opportunities, drawing on their understanding of the transformative potential of these spaces in supporting individual growth and collective resilience.

Hence, the relationship between participants' understanding and intentionality with respect to creative spaces after the pandemic is characterized by a synergy between insights gained from the pandemic experience and proactive strategies for leveraging creative spaces to foster innovation, collaboration, and community resilience in a post-pandemic world.

IV.   Discussion

Analyzing the understanding, use, and intentionality of the respondents on creative spaces in the context of resilience theory reveals several key insights:

Understanding of Creative Spaces. Respondents view creative spaces as environments designed to inspire innovation, foster collaboration, and promote emotional well-being. These spaces are perceived as essential hubs for creative expression, learning, and community engagement. This understanding aligns with resilience theory, which emphasizes the role of supportive environments in facilitating adaptation and recovery during times of crisis. By providing a platform for self-expression, social connection, and skill development, creative spaces contribute to individuals' and communities' ability to bounce back from adversity.

Use of Creative Spaces. Respondents demonstrate intentional use of creative spaces to address various needs and challenges, including fostering creativity, promoting collaboration, and providing emotional support. They leverage physical and virtual platforms to facilitate engagement and participation, adapting their use of creative spaces to meet changing circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This adaptive approach reflects resilience theory's emphasis on flexibility and resourcefulness in responding to disruptions. By creatively adapting their use of spaces, individuals and communities enhance their capacity to navigate crises and build resilience.

Intentionality of Use. Respondents exhibited intentionality in designing and utilizing creative spaces to stimulate creativity, promote collaboration, and support well-being. They prioritize creating environments that inspire exploration, curiosity, and self-expression, incorporating elements such as flexible layouts, attractive features, and technological integration to enhance engagement and participation. This intentional approach aligns with resilience theory's focus on proactive strategies for coping with adversity and promoting adaptive capacity. By deliberately designing and utilizing creative spaces, individuals and communities strengthen their resilience by fostering creativity, social connection, and emotional well-being.

V.   Conclusion

The understanding, use, and intentionality of the respondents vis-a-viscreative spacesresonate with resilience theory's principles of adaptation, resourcefulness, and community support. By harnessing the potential of creative spaces to inspire innovation, foster collaboration, and promote well-being, individuals and communities enhance their capacity to withstand and thrive in the face of adversity.

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