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# Global City Competitiveness: Gendered Labor Dynamics and Women's Economic Participation in Jakarta, Indonesia

## Abstract

Globalization and digital economic transformation have intensified competition among cities to strengthen their positions in global economic networks. While global city scholars have traditionally emphasized advanced producer services, finance, and highly skilled labor as the primary drivers of urban competitiveness, less attention has been given to the gendered dynamics of urban labor markets. This study examines how women's economic participation contributes to urban competitiveness in Jakarta, a rapidly transforming metropolitan region experiencing structural adjustments as Indonesia's national capital. A qualitative case study approach was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 18 informants representing government agencies, financial institutions, civil society organizations, and women entrepreneurs, complemented by secondary data from policy documents and official statistics. The findings indicate that women play a significant role in sustaining Jakarta's urban economy through microenterprises, digital entrepreneurship, and localized production networks that support household income and community-level employment. However, women's economic participation remains constrained by structural barriers, including limited digital and financial literacy, household economic vulnerability, gender segmentation within digital markets, and fragmented policy support for microenterprise development. These findings suggest that urban competitiveness cannot be understood solely through high-value global economic sectors; decentralized entrepreneurial networks that sustain local economic resilience must also be considered. Therefore, this study argues that gender-inclusive economic participation constitutes a structural component of sustainable urban competitiveness in emerging globalizing cities.

**Keywords:** global cities; urban competitiveness; gendered labor markets; digital entrepreneurship; informal economy; Jakarta

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## Introduction

Urban economic development has increasingly been shaped by globalization processes that reorganize the spatial distribution of economic activities across metropolitan regions. Over the past several decades, certain cities have emerged as strategic nodes within global economic networks, concentrating financial services, corporate headquarters, advanced producer services and knowledge-intensive industries. These cities, commonly conceptualized as *global cities*, function as command and coordination centers that facilitate the circulation of capital, information, and labor within the global economy (Sassen, 2001). Within this framework, urban competitiveness has become a central concern for policymakers and scholars as cities compete to attract investment, innovation, and highly skilled labor in an increasingly interconnected economic system.

The emergence of global cities is closely associated with broader processes of economic restructuring that have transformed the organization of production and employment in metropolitan areas. Manufacturing activities have declined in many urban regions. Economic growth has increasingly been driven by service-based industries, digital technologies and transnational corporate networks. These transformations have reshaped urban labor markets, generating new employment opportunities while simultaneously producing new forms of labor segmentation and inequalities (Scott, 2018). Consequently, urban competitiveness cannot be understood solely through infrastructure development or capital investments. It is also shaped by institutional and social arrangements that structure participation in emerging economic sectors and determine how economic opportunities are distributed within urban society.

Despite the extensive literature on global cities and urban competitiveness, social foundations of urban labor markets have often received comparatively limited attention. Much of the existing literature continues to emphasize highly skilled labor, financial services, and advanced producer services as the primary drivers of urban economic performance (Sassen, 2001; Scott, 2018). While these sectors undoubtedly play an important role in integrating cities into global economic networks, such perspectives frequently overlook other forms of labor that sustain everyday economic activities within urban economies. From the perspective of Social Reproduction Theory (Bakker, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017), the high-value production of global cities is inextricably linked to the ‘hidden’ reproductive labor, mostly performed by women, that ensures the daily and generational maintenance of the workforce. In particular, the role of women’s labor in shaping urban economic resilience and competitiveness remains underexplored in global city research.

Feminist political economy scholars have long argued that labor markets are not gender-neutral institutions but are instead embedded within social norms, institutional arrangements, and power relations that structure access to economic opportunities (Elson, 1999). Gendered expectations regarding household responsibilities, access to financial resources, and broader cultural norms surrounding work and care influence women’s participation in labor

markets in ways that differ significantly from men. Consequently, women are frequently concentrated in sectors characterized by informal employment, lower wages, and limited opportunities for economic mobility (Kabeer, 2016). These structural inequalities have important implications for urban economic development because they shape the distribution of productive opportunities within metropolitan economies and influence how cities mobilize their labor force in the processes of economic transformation.

The gendered organization of labor markets becomes particularly visible in contexts where economic restructuring generates new opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment. While globalization and technological change have expanded economic opportunities in many urban regions, they have also produced new forms of labor segmentation that reproduce existing inequalities. Therefore, women's participation in urban economies is shaped not only by market dynamics but also by institutional and social constraints that influence access to resources, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurial activities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the broader implications of urban economic restructuring for inclusive, sustainable development.

Recent technological transformations have reshaped urban labor markets through the expansion of digital economies and platform-mediated work. Digital technologies have enabled new forms of economic participation through e-commerce platforms, online marketplaces, and platform-based labor systems that connect workers and consumers across geographical boundaries. These developments have facilitated the growth of digital entrepreneurship and gig economy employment, both of which play increasingly significant roles in contemporary urban economies. Platform-based work is typically characterized by flexible employment arrangements, decentralized production processes, and algorithmic management systems that regulate task allocation and remuneration (Wood et al., 2019).

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has generated significant debate regarding their implications for labor market inclusion and economic opportunities. On the one hand, digital technologies may reduce barriers to economic participation by

enabling individuals to engage in entrepreneurial activities without requiring substantial capital investments or formal employment arrangements. Online marketplaces, digital payment systems, and social media marketing tools have expanded access to economic opportunities, particularly for individuals operating outside the formal labor market (Graham et al., 2017). However, emerging research suggests that digital labor markets may reproduce existing inequalities when access to digital infrastructure, technological capabilities, and financial resources remains unevenly distributed.

These dynamics are particularly relevant to women's economic participation in urban contexts. Digital platforms may offer flexible employment opportunities that enable women to combine income-generating activities with their household responsibilities. However, this flexibility often leads to the 'Triple Burden' (Moser, 1989), where digital connectivity blurs the boundaries between productive work, reproductive duties, and community management, potentially intensifying women's total labor time. Limited digital literacy, restricted access to financial capital, and time constraints associated with unpaid care work may constrain female entrepreneurs' capacity to expand their businesses or enter higher-value economic sectors. Consequently, women's participation in digital economies often remains concentrated in small-scale entrepreneurial activities with relatively limited growth potential.

Despite the growing interest in digital entrepreneurship and urban economic transformation, several important gaps remain in the literature. First, global city research continues to prioritize highly skilled labor and advanced producer services as the principal drivers of urban competitiveness, often overlooking the economic significance of microenterprises, informal labor, and small-scale entrepreneurship, which sustain local economic systems. Second, although feminist political economy scholars have highlighted the gendered nature of labor markets, these insights have rarely been fully integrated into analyses of urban economic competitiveness. Consequently, the ways in which gendered labor dynamics shape urban economic performance remain unexamined.

Third, empirical studies examining gendered labor dynamics in urban economies have largely

focused on Western metropolitan contexts. Rapidly transforming cities in Southeast Asia, where digital economies coexist with large informal sectors and complex labor market structures, remain comparatively underrepresented in the literature. This gap is particularly significant, given the rapid urbanization and economic transformation occurring across the region.

Jakarta provides an important empirical context for examining these dynamics in Indonesia. As Indonesia's largest metropolitan region and primary economic hub, Jakarta plays a central role in coordinating financial services, corporate management and national economic activities. Recent policy developments, including the relocation of Indonesia's national capital to Nusantara, have intensified efforts to reposition Jakarta as a globally competitive economic center. In this context, digital entrepreneurship and small business development are increasingly promoted as key drivers of urban economic growth.

Simultaneously, Jakarta's urban economy remains strongly characterized by microenterprise activity and informal economic participation. These activities represent a form of 'informal agglomeration', spatially concentrated networks of small-scale providers that reduce the cost of living and doing business in the city (Chen, 2012). A significant proportion of economic activities within the city are conducted through small-scale businesses and household-based enterprises that operate outside formal corporate structures. Women play a particularly prominent role in these sectors, especially in microenterprises related to food production, retail, fashion, and household services. These activities frequently serve as critical sources of income for urban households while contributing to localized economic circulation within urban neighborhoods.

Against this background, this study examines how women's economic participation contributes to Jakarta's urban competitiveness as the city undergoes a structural economic transformation. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: How do female workers contribute to Jakarta's economic competitiveness as a global city? What structural barriers limit women's economic participation in

Jakarta's urban economy? How can gender-inclusive policies strengthen the competitiveness of global cities? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to global city scholarship by integrating insights from feminist political economy and digital labor studies. The analysis highlights how gendered labor dynamics shape urban economic systems and demonstrates that women's economic participation represents a critical yet often overlooked dimension of sustainable urban competitiveness.

## Methods

This study employed a **qualitative case study approach** to investigate how women's economic participation contributes to urban competitiveness in Jakarta and to identify the structural barriers shaping their participation in the city's evolving economic system. A qualitative case study design was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of complex social and institutional dynamics within a specific urban context, allowing researchers to explore how economic participation is shaped by governance structures, labor market conditions, and socioeconomic constraints (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Jakarta was selected as the empirical case because of its position as Indonesia's primary economic center as the national capital, which has intensified policy efforts to strengthen the city's competitiveness within regional and global economic networks.

Primary data were collected through **semi-structured in-depth interviews** conducted between January and June 2025 with **18 informants** representing diverse institutional perspectives on women's economic participation. The informants included government officials from agencies responsible for economic development and labor policies, representatives of financial institutions and civil society organizations, and women entrepreneurs engaged in microenterprise and digital economic activities. Participants were selected through **purposive sampling**, with selection criteria based on their involvement in policy implementation, economic programs, or entrepreneurial activities related to women's participation in Jakarta's urban economy. To capture additional relevant perspectives, **snowball**

**sampling** was subsequently applied, allowing the initial informants to recommend other participants with relevant knowledge and experience (Patton, 2015).

Secondary data were also examined to complement the interview findings. These sources include official statistics published by Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency, policy documents related to microenterprise development and urban economic planning, and reports from international organizations addressing gender equality and digital economic participation.

Data analysis was conducted using **thematic analysis**, following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were first transcribed and systematically coded to identify recurring patterns related to women's economic participation, the structural constraints, and institutional governance. The codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the key analytical categories emerging from the data. The integration of the interview findings with documentary sources allowed for triangulation, strengthening the credibility and interpretive validity of the analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Women's Economic Participation in Jakarta's Urban Economy***

The findings indicate that women play a significant role in sustaining Jakarta's urban economy through participation in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), digital entrepreneurship, and localized economic networks. In many cases, women-led economic activities are organized through small-scale businesses operating within neighborhood markets, home-based production systems, and online commerce platforms. These enterprises are commonly concentrated in sectors such as culinary production, fashion, and retail services, which require relatively low initial capital but remain central to local economic activity. Through these activities, women entrepreneurs contribute not only to household income but also to the maintenance of neighborhood-based production and consumption networks in the community. These networks constitute a form of 'informal agglomeration' (Chen, 2012), where the

spatial concentration of women-led microenterprises creates localized efficiencies that lower the cost of urban living. This informal clustering sustains everyday economic transactions within the city, providing a resilient foundation that supports the more visible and formal sectors of Jakarta's global economy.

The expansion of digital platforms has enabled women entrepreneurs to access broader markets beyond their immediate communities. Social media platforms and online marketplaces are frequently used to promote products, manage orders, and maintain customer relationships. These technologies have reduced certain spatial barriers that previously constrained the growth of small-scale enterprises, allowing women to integrate their businesses into broader urban and regional markets. Therefore, digital entrepreneurship functions as an important mechanism through which women's economic participation is incorporated into the broader urban economy.

Despite the relatively small scale of most women-led enterprises, their cumulative economic contributions are substantial. Interview data indicate that many women entrepreneurs employ family members, neighbors, or informal workers in their production activities, thereby generating localized employment opportunities. In this sense, women's entrepreneurship contributes to urban economic resilience by sustaining community-level production networks that support local consumption and employability. These findings suggest that the economic vitality of Jakarta's urban economy is not driven exclusively by large-scale corporate sectors but is also supported by decentralized networks of small-scale enterprises operating in local markets.

### ***Structural Constraints in Women's Economic Participation***

Although women's participation in Jakarta's urban economy is clearly visible, the findings reveal a range of structural barriers that limit the growth and sustainability of women-led enterprises. These constraints are closely related to disparities in digital and financial literacy, household economic vulnerability, and the institutional fragmentation of MSME development policies. From the perspective of feminist political economy, these barriers reflect

broader structural inequalities that shape women's access to economic resources and opportunities (Elson, 1999; Kabeer, 2016).

One of the most frequently identified constraints is the limited digital literacy of women entrepreneurs. While many women utilize social media platforms to promote their products, more advanced digital business practices, such as data-driven marketing strategies, inventory management systems, and online financial management, remain less widely adopted by women entrepreneurs. Limited familiarity with digital technologies restricts women entrepreneurs' ability to expand their businesses or access more competitive digital marketplaces.

Financial literacy limitations are also identified as an important challenge. Many female entrepreneurs operate their businesses without systematic financial planning or accounting practices. Business revenues are often intertwined with household finances, making it difficult to evaluate profitability or reinvest capital in business expansion. This lack of financial separation is not merely a technical oversight but reflects the 'Triple Burden' (Moser, 1989) faced by women, where the boundaries between productive business management, reproductive domestic duties, and community expectations are constantly blurred. Without adequate financial management skills, microenterprises frequently remain small and are vulnerable to economic shocks. This vulnerability is deeply rooted in 'time poverty', a structural consequence of women's primary role in social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017), which often restricts the time and energy available for formal financial training or strategic business expansion. Household economic vulnerability further influences women's entrepreneurial trajectories. Interviews revealed that many women began operating microenterprises in response to economic disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. When household income declined due to job losses among male household members, women frequently entered small-scale business activities to stabilize family finances. Under these conditions, entrepreneurship often functions as a survivalist social reproduction strategy rather than a long-term business development plan, highlighting how women's labor becomes a crucial safety net during urban economic crises.

Institutional fragmentation also limits the effectiveness of programs designed to support women's economic participation in the labor force. Multiple government agencies and partner organizations provide training and assistance to MSMEs; however, these initiatives are often implemented without strong coordination mechanisms. Consequently, training programs may overlap in content while failing to provide sustained mentoring or integrated support for business development. Such fragmentation reduces the overall impact of policies intended to strengthen women's economic empowerment in the region.

### ***Gendered Segmentation in Digital and Platform Economies***

The findings also reveal patterns of gendered segmentation within Jakarta's digital and platform-based economic sectors. Although digital platforms have expanded opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment, participation in these platforms remains unevenly distributed across sectors and economic activities. Women entrepreneurs were found to be concentrated in sectors characterized by relatively low profit margins, including food products, clothing, and small-scale retail services.

In contrast, higher-value sectors within the digital economy, such as electronics distribution, technology services, and large-scale online commerce, remain dominated by male entrepreneurs. This distribution reflects the broader patterns of gender segmentation observed in labor markets, where access to capital, technological expertise, and professional networks influences participation in more profitable economic sectors. The gig economy further illustrates the dual nature of digital economic opportunity. Platform-mediated work offers flexible employment arrangements that can accommodate women's domestic responsibilities, particularly for individuals balancing income generation and caregiving roles. Flexible working hours and home-based work arrangements enable women to participate in income-generating activities without leaving their households. However, while digital platforms are often marketed as tools for empowerment, they frequently function as 'spatial fixes' that allow the global economy to extract value from women's labor while externalizing the

costs of social reproduction. These findings indicate that digital markets do not necessarily eliminate structural inequalities; instead, they may produce a ‘digital gender divide’ where women remain tethered to low-value tasks that fit around their domestic responsibilities.”

However, this flexibility is often accompanied by high levels of economic insecurities. Gig economy workers typically operate without formal employment contracts, income stability, or comprehensive social protection. Payment systems are frequently task-based and determined by algorithmic management systems that allocate work opportunities and determine compensation levels. Consequently, workers may experience fluctuating incomes and limited bargaining power within platform-based labor markets. These findings indicate that digital markets do not necessarily eliminate structural inequality. Instead, gender disparities may persist when access to capital, digital infrastructure, and technical expertise remains inequitable. Consequently, while digital platforms create new economic opportunities, they may also reproduce existing gender inequalities in emerging forms of work.

### ***Policy Governance and Institutional Gaps***

Another significant finding concerns the institutional environment that shapes women’s economic participation. Despite policy initiatives aimed at supporting entrepreneurship and small business development, gaps remain in the governance structures and social protection systems that influence women’s economic opportunities. Social protection coverage represents one of the most critical institutional gaps. Many women entrepreneurs and gig economy workers operate outside formal employment relationships and, therefore, lack access to employment-based social protection systems. Existing social protection programs are primarily designed around standard employer-employee arrangements, leaving many informal and self-employed workers without adequate coverage. Consequently, women participating in microenterprises or digital labor platforms often face increased economic vulnerability during periods of illness, income disruption, or economic crises.

Fragmented governance also limits the effectiveness of economic empowerment programs. Multiple institutions, including local government agencies, development organizations, and private sector platforms, implement programs to support women entrepreneurs. However, the coordination among these initiatives remains limited. Without integrated policy frameworks, support programs may operate in isolation, reducing their capacity to address the structural challenges faced by female entrepreneurs.

The absence of coordinated policy strategies further complicates efforts to expand women’s participation in higher-value sectors. While training programs frequently focus on basic entrepreneurial skills, fewer initiatives address structural barriers, such as access to financing, digital infrastructure, and market integration. Consequently, institutional fragmentation reduces the overall effectiveness of policies designed to strengthen women’s economic participation in urban areas.

### ***Rethinking Gender in Global City Competitiveness***

The findings of this study have several theoretical implications for the literature on global cities, urban competitiveness, and gendered labor markets. Classical global city frameworks have largely emphasized the centrality of advanced producer services, the financial sector, and highly skilled knowledge workers in shaping urban economic competitiveness (Sassen, 2001; Scott, 2018). From this perspective, cities achieve global economic significance through their integration into transnational networks of capital, finance, and information, while labor market dynamics are typically interpreted through the lens of high-value service industries and knowledge-intensive production systems. Consequently, the analytical focus of global city research has tended to prioritize corporate actors, financial institutions, and highly skilled professionals as the principal drivers of urban economic growth.

However, the empirical evidence presented in this study suggests that such frameworks provide only a partial account of how urban economies function in rapidly transforming cities, such as Jakarta. The findings

demonstrate that women-led microenterprises and digital micro-entrepreneurship constitute an important economic layer that sustains localized production networks and everyday consumption systems within the city. These enterprises often operate on a relatively small scale, yet they collectively generate employment opportunities, support household income stability, and maintain local economic circulation across urban neighborhoods. Rather than functioning as peripheral economic activities, these forms of entrepreneurship contribute to the resilience and adaptability of urban economies, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty.

These findings challenge a key assumption within conventional global city theory: that urban competitiveness is driven primarily by high-value sectors embedded in global economic networks. While financial services and advanced producer services undoubtedly play a central role in connecting cities to global markets, evidence from Jakarta indicates that localized economic systems, many of which are sustained by women entrepreneurs, also play a critical role in maintaining urban economic stability. This observation aligns with recent critiques of global city literature that emphasize the need to examine how informal economies, small enterprises, and household-based production contribute to the functioning of globalizing cities (Chant and McIlwaine 2016; Roy 2009).

From the perspective of feminist political economy, these findings further illustrate how gendered labor dynamics shape urban economic systems. Women's participation in microenterprises and digital entrepreneurship often emerges at the intersection of productive and reproductive labor responsibilities. Household economic vulnerability, limited access to capital, and restricted labor market opportunities frequently influence the sectors in which women economically participate. Consequently, women entrepreneurs are often concentrated in industries with relatively low entry barriers, such as food production, clothing, and retail services. However, the economic significance of these sectors should not be underestimated. Feminist economic scholars have long argued that forms of labor associated with social reproduction and informal economic activities

constitute essential components of broader economic systems (Elson, 1999; Kabeer, 2016).

These findings also contribute to ongoing debates regarding the role of digital technologies in transforming labor markets and economic participation. Much of the literature on digital economies suggests that platform technologies can expand economic opportunities by lowering barriers to entry for entrepreneurs and workers (Graham et al. 2017). While this potential was partially observed in Jakarta, particularly through the use of social media platforms and online marketplaces, the study also found that participation in digital entrepreneurship remains strongly influenced by structural inequalities. Limited digital literacy, restricted access to financial resources, and gendered household responsibilities continue to shape women's capacity to scale their businesses and enter higher-value digital markets. In this sense, the findings support emerging research indicating that digital markets do not automatically produce inclusive economic outcomes when access to resources is uneven (Wood et al., 2019).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the concept of urban competitiveness may need to be reconsidered to incorporate gender-inclusive forms of economic participation. Rather than focusing exclusively on high-skilled labor and advanced service sectors, analyses of global city competitiveness should also account for decentralized economic activities that sustain local economic systems. Women-led microenterprises, household-based production networks, and digital microentrepreneurship collectively contribute to urban economic resilience by maintaining employment opportunities and stabilizing local consumption patterns. These forms of economic participation represent a critical, yet often overlooked, component of urban economic systems.

Accordingly, this study proposes that global city competitiveness should be conceptualized as a **multi-layered economic system** in which global financial networks coexist with localized entrepreneurial economies. Within such systems, gendered labor dynamics influence the distribution of economic opportunities across sectors and social groups. Recognizing these dynamics expands the analytical scope of global city research by highlighting the

importance of inclusive economic participation in sustaining urban resilience. From this perspective, women's economic participation should be understood not merely as a matter of social inclusion but as a structural component of sustainable urban economic development.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's economic participation constitutes an important, yet often under-recognized, component of Jakarta's urban economic system. Through engagement in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), digital entrepreneurship, and localized production networks, women contribute to the functioning and resilience of the city's economy. These activities support household income generation, sustain neighborhood-based economic circulation, and create localized employment opportunities in urban communities. However, the study also reveals that women's participation in the urban economy remains constrained by several structural barriers, including limited digital and financial literacy, household economic vulnerability, and fragmented policy support for microenterprise development. Furthermore, gendered segmentation within digital and platform-based economic sectors continues to influence women's access to higher-value opportunities.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on global city development by demonstrating that urban competitiveness cannot be understood solely through the lens of high-value global economic sectors, such as finance and advanced producer services. While these sectors remain central to global economic networks, the findings suggest that localized entrepreneurial systems, many of which are sustained by women-led microenterprises, also play a crucial role in maintaining urban economic stability and resilience. By integrating insights from feminist political economy and global city theory, this study highlights how gendered labor dynamics shape the distribution of economic opportunities within urban economies. In doing so, this research challenges conventional assumptions within the global city literature that prioritize highly skilled labor while overlooking the contributions of decentralized

entrepreneurial activities that sustain everyday economic systems.

These findings have several important policy implications for urban economic governance. First, policies aimed at strengthening urban competitiveness should incorporate gender-inclusive strategies that address the structural barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. Programs designed to support microenterprise development must move beyond short-term training initiatives and provide sustained mentorship, access to financing, and integrated business development support. Second, improving digital and financial literacy programs is essential for enabling female entrepreneurs to participate more effectively in digital marketplaces and expand their businesses into higher-value economic sectors. Third, social protection systems should be adapted to accommodate workers in informal and platform-based economic activities, ensuring that women participating in digital entrepreneurship and gig economy work have access to adequate economic security mechanisms.

This study has several limitations. The analysis focuses on Jakarta as a single metropolitan case; therefore, the findings may not fully capture variations in gendered labor dynamics across other cities undergoing similar economic transformations. Future research could expand the comparative scope by examining multiple globalizing cities in Southeast Asia to better understand how local institutional contexts influence women's economic participation. Further studies could explore how intersecting factors, such as class, education, migration status, and access to digital infrastructure, shape women's entrepreneurial trajectories within urban economies. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusive economic policies can support sustainable and equitable urban developments.

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