

**Controversial Product Advertising in China:
Perceptions of Three Generational Cohorts**

Kim-Shyan Fam
Department of Marketing
University of Otago
P O Box 56, Dunedin
New Zealand
Tel: + 64 3 479 7692
Fax: + 64 3 479 8172
Email: kimfam@business.otago.ac.nz

David S. Waller
School of Marketing
University Technology Sydney
Australia

Fon-Sim Ong
Department of Marketing and Information System
University of Malaya
Malaysia

Zhilin Yang¹
Department of Marketing
City University of Hong Kong
Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: + 852 2784 4644
Fax: + 852 2788 9146
Email: mkzyang@cityu.edu.hk

¹ Corresponding author

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Abstract

China is a country that has undergone a wide range of significant changes over the last 30 years, economically, politically, and socially. Major events not only have an important effect on the developmental history of a country such as China, but create a new generational cohort, which can adopt different views and attitudes than those characterizing previous generations. This study analyses the results of a survey of three different generational groups in China, focusing on their attitudes towards the promotion of controversial products and advertising execution techniques. Research results show significant differences between the younger and older generations, especially in regard to gender related products and certain advertising execution techniques.

Introduction

Over time China has been transformed from a feudal system to a strict communist state, and, then, to one which is opening up to foreign investment and competition to become a modernized socialist economy with a larger role for private and collectively owned enterprises (Ha 1996). These changes have not only had an effect on the economy in general, but also on the individuals in the society. When such changes occur it is claimed that this can influence value systems and give rise to a new “generational cohort” (Inglehart 1977). These different generational market segments are influenced by the socioeconomic resources available during their youth, and result in different values and attitudes. As China has been in transition for the past few decades, it is commonly believed that intergenerational differences in attitudes towards specific issues exist.

As a result of the opening up of markets, the advertising industry has undergone changes in tandem with the opening up of the Chinese market to foreign goods and advertisers (Chang 1989; Ho and Chan 1989; Parsons 1993; Cheng 1996; Ha 1996). Due to the development of regional and global media, such as regional magazines, satellite television, and the internet, Chinese consumers have a greater opportunity to be exposed to different types of advertising,

including the advertising of potentially socially sensitive or controversial products (Tai 1997; Waller and Fam 2003). Although the benefits from standardization of communications (e.g. advertising messages, design and appeal) are obvious to international marketers, cultural differences between the West and China might result in Chinese consumers rejecting standardised advertisements. This is because consumers in China are likely to uphold traditional Chinese values, which are intrinsically in conflict with Western ideas and values. Hence, it is crucial for international marketers to understand the attitude of consumers in China toward advertising. In addition, Chinese consumers who have experienced significant changes over several decades are expected to manifest indications of generational cohort effects (Inglehart 1977).

While the main aim of this paper is to examine generational cohort attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products and advertising execution techniques, we also ask the question “Are there significant differences among the different generational cohorts with regard to their perception on advertising of controversial products?” This paper will analyze a sample of 630 Chinese consumers (210 between the ages of 15 and 21; 210 between 34 and 56; and 210 over 57 years old) to determine their level of offence towards the advertising of various controversial products and the main reasons for offence, as well as to verify where there are attitudinal differences. From the findings, some implications will be derived regarding the results and their effect on marketing to China’s consumer market.

Background

Generational Cohorts

According to generational cohort theory, events of national significance shake the foundation of existing social orders and value systems, and give birth to new generational cohorts

(Inglehart 1977). The theory is based on the scarcity hypothesis, which proposes that cohorts tend to place greatest subjective value on the socioeconomic resources that were in short supply during their youth. Inglehart (1997) claims that generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic insecurity (e.g. social unrest) learn survival values (e.g. economic determinism, rationality), whereas, in contrast, generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic security learn postmodernist values. In addition, differences in values, attitudes and lifestyles across cohorts tend to be largest in countries that have experienced the highest rates of economic growth (Abraham and Inglehart 1995).

Events of significance that occurred in China after the second world-war included the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Anti-Rightist and Great Leap Forward movements in the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Economic Reforms beginning in 1978. According to Wang and Wu (2002), these events have resulted in five distinct generational cohorts among present day Chinese. The first cohort is the Red Generation, born before or during the founding of the PRC in 1949: they suffered great economic hardship, resulting in self-sacrifice being inherent in their value system (Wang and Wu, 2002). Members of the second cohort were born during the formative years of the Cultural Revolution, between 1951 and 1964. This group was disillusioned by the collapse of communist ideals in China and is cautious in their social perspectives. The third cohort consists of members born between 1965 and 1973. Becoming teenagers during the Cultural Revolution, these consumers take pride in individual accomplishments and have strong interests in themselves relative to the previous generation. People of the fourth cohort were born between 1974 and 1984. Often termed Generation Xers, members of this cohort came of age during China's economic reform years and witnessed the rapid development of the market economy. They have had better educational opportunities and have been well

exposed to Western popular culture through their experience with movies, magazines and other media programs. The youngest cohort is the Generation Yers, who are often claimed to be the children of second and third generation cohorts. Born between 1980 and 2000, Generation Yers as a whole are career driven and motivated, very optimistic, knowledgeable, and recognize that education is the key to their success.

Controversial Products

Controversial advertising can be defined as “advertising that, by the type of product or execution, can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage from a segment of the population when presented” (Waller 2005, p. 11). A number of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising (Wilson and West 1981; Rehman and Brooks 1987; Barnes and Dotson 1990; Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell 1995; Waller 1999; Fam, Waller and Erdogan 2004; and Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005). In the Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004) study, the authors found religion has an impact on respondents’ perceptions of controversial products. In particular, the religious respondents tended to find advertising of Gender/Sex related products (like condoms, female underwear, and female contraceptives) as more offensive than those respondents who are less religious. Furthermore, Islamic respondents tended to find advertising of Gender/Sex related products, Socially Sensitive products, and Addictive products as more offensive than respondents with Christian and/or Buddhist/Taoist backgrounds (Fam, Waller and Erdogan, 2004; Waller, Fam and Erdogan, 2005).

Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. The creative execution

technique used in an advertisement, even one for a product that is not by nature a controversial product, can make the advertisement controversial (Waller 1999). Some execution techniques perceived as potentially offensive include: Anti-Social Behaviour, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist, Sexist, and Subject Too Personal (Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005). A few previous studies have shown that males and younger people have a greater acceptance of controversial advertising (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Grazer and Keesling 1995), with advertisers more often using sexual or violent images to attract younger people (Bushman, and Bonacci, 2002; Reichert 2003). Yet there is always the possibility that those not in the campaign's target audience may still be exposed to the message and be offended. In general, Fahy et al., (1995) found that comparing the attitudes of people according to sex, age, income, region, education and race, women, particularly aged 50 and over, had much higher disapproval levels for such commercials.

A further reason for undertaking this study is the dearth of information on controversial product advertising in Asia, particularly among different generational cohorts. Although the majority of controversial product advertising studies have been from the United States, with a focus on western attitudes, there has been a growing interest in observing attitudes towards advertising of controversial products in Asian countries, including China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore (Phau and Prendergast 2001; Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002; Waller and Fam 2003; and Fam, Waller and Erdogan 2004). However, despite China being an important market in terms of population size and potential economic benefits, very few studies examine the effects of generational cohorts on controversial products advertising.

In view of the past research on differences between the views of different age groups, as well as the historical difference between the three generational cohorts, the following hypotheses are developed.

H1: There will be statistical differences in the degree of offensiveness between the generations with regard to their attitudes toward the advertising of different controversial products.

H2: There will be statistical differences in the degree of offensiveness between the generations with regard to their attitudes toward different advertising execution techniques.

Methodology

The survey was conducted in three Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) and was carried out by a China based professional research firm, as only government sanctioned research agencies can carry out surveys in China (State Education Commission, 1985). In order to avoid any biases in relation to gender, age and location, it was decided to adopt a stratified sampling frame. Instructions to the research agency with respect to sample composition are to select: first, 50% males and 50% females in each city, secondly one third of the males/females must be between the ages of 15 and 21; one-third between 34 and 56; and one-third over 57 years old. The three age groups were intended to reflect the 'Y' generation, the Cultural Revolution generation, and the Red Generation consumers, respectively (Wang and Wu, 2002; Dou, Wang and Zhou, 2006). Using these age groups would also allow us to examine the attitudes of 'children', 'parents' and 'grandparents' toward advertising of controversial products. Thirdly, the respondents must be randomly selected, i.e. every third person the trained interviewer saw. Each interviewer (five in total) was asked to record the interviewees' name and telephone number in a logbook, and approximately 20 respondents were randomly called to confirm that they had been interviewed. A total of 630 respondents participated in this study.

The interview took 5-7 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. In section one, the respondents were asked to state their perceptions of 17 controversial products, if advertised nationally, on a Likert-type scale of 1 (not offensive at all) to 5 (very offensive). The 17 controversial products used were similar to the ones used in Waller (1999). Section two required the respondents to state their opinion of the reasons for offensiveness with ten execution techniques being shown. These execution techniques were adopted from earlier studies by Waller (1999) and Fam, Waller and Erdogan, (2004). The last section recorded the respondents' age, gender and city they live in. The questionnaire was translated using the back-to-back translation method.

Results

Data analysis

A total of 630 responses were collected for this study. The respondents were equally distributed across gender, age and city. The majority (>80%) of the respondents have at least a post secondary education. Factor analysis using varimax rotation was performed on the dataset. The analysis has resulted in three fairly robust factors: 'Gender/Sex related products' (female contraceptives; female underwear; condoms; and female hygiene products), 'Social/Political Groups' (racially extreme groups; religious denominations; and political parties) and 'Addictive products' (cigarette; alcohol; and gambling). These three factors are similar to Fam, Waller and Erdogan's (2004) study. The three factors explained more than 60 percent of the variance (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 Here

Attitudes toward Controversial Products

Overall, as seen in Table 2, the products that were perceived as the most offensive when advertised were Gambling ($\bar{X} = 4.38$, $SD = 1.02$), Racially Extremist Groups ($\bar{X} = 3.91$, $SD = 1.21$), Female Contraceptives ($\bar{X} = 3.45$, $SD = 1.29$) and Religious Denominations ($\bar{X} = 3.43$, $SD = 1.24$). Gambling was also perceived as being the most offensive by all three generational cohorts. In relation to the Factors, the ‘Y’ generation group was the least offended by advertisements for Gender/sex related and Addictive products, but most offended by advertising for all three Social/political groups. Comparing the age groups, a Bonferroni-t test was run based on age groups, and there are statistical differences on all Gender/sex related products with the Red Generation group being more offended than both the other groups. As for the other items, the Red Generation was more offended by Gambling advertisements than the ‘Y’ Generation group ($p < 0.05$), while the younger group was more offended by the advertising of religious denominations than the oldest group ($p < 0.01$), and advertising for political parties compared to the other two groups ($p < 0.05$). There were no statistical differences between the groups for the advertising of Racially Extremist Groups, Alcohol and Cigarettes. As there were only some statistical differences between the generational cohort groups, H1 can only be partially accepted.

Insert Table 2 Here

Attitudes toward Controversial Executions

Compared to Chinese consumers’ attitudes towards controversial products, their attitudes toward the various advertising execution techniques showed a higher degree of offensiveness

as indicated by mean scores across most of the execution techniques (Table 3). The most offensive execution techniques were: Indecent language ($\bar{X} = 4.47$, $SD = 0.94$), Hard Sell ($\bar{X} = 4.37$, $SD = 0.94$), Violence ($\bar{X} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.00$), Anti-Social Behaviour ($\bar{X} = 4.13$, $SD = 1.24$), Nudity ($\bar{X} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.17$) and Racist Images ($\bar{X} = 4.03$, $SD = 1.08$). Of the 12 items, 3 items were different at the .01 level (Violence, Nudity, and Sexist/Sexual Images) and 2 at the .05 level (Indecent language and Subject too personal), with the Red Generation being more offended than the 'Y' Generation. The youngest generation was not as offended by Violence as the Cultural Revolution generation, and the middle age group was also less offended by Sexual/Sexist images compared to the Red Generation. None of the groups perceived execution techniques for Health and Safety issues and Concern for children as offensive. Since the perceptions of the three cohorts did not differ significantly for all the execution techniques, H2 could only be partially supported.

Insert Table 3 Here

Discussion

In relation to controversial products, the advertising of Gambling was generally seen as the most offensive. In general, the generations would find gambling offensive as it is a lazy and non-productive way to pass time. Especially for the older generations, workers were employed by state enterprises with a collective goal, and so no one was prepared to work harder than the rest' therefore, idle time was spent at a poker or "mah-jong" session. However, post Deng's reform the "emergence of the voice of the self" became more apparent which has given rise to the Neo-Confucian notion of the mind as the seat of consciousness, knowledge and moral judgment (Yang, 1994). Consequently gambling is seen by the three generations

as merely a waste of time, particularly from the older Red Generation's point of view. This can also be attributed partly to the hardship they endured during their earlier life, including the famine of the 60's.

The Red Generation was extremely offended by gender/sex related products advertising. This generation was comprised of people who are mostly un-educated and live in villages. They are most likely to adhere to traditional values, harbouring the belief that women are of low status and should not be educated as enshrined within the general principles of Confucian values. They also tend to believe in Taoism, which accords high respect and high status to males since Taoist monks are highly revered. The Red Generation were most offended by condoms and contraceptive product advertisements, which are products for birth control. Their negative attitudes could be attributed to the Chinese values of "*keeping oneself disinterested and pure*", and "*having few desires*" (Chinese Culture Connection 1987), and also their hardened attitudes towards women being subservient to men. Their constant reminder and recital of communist ideology during the years when they were growing up could have suppressed their desire for things related to sex. Next the 'woman-related' items such as hygiene products and underwear were seen as inferior since women occupy low status in society. Additionally, message executions such as Nudity, Subject too personal and Sexist/Sexual images are perceived as offensive by the Red Generation, which is consistent with the notion that this generation is conservative and adheres to traditional values where women and sexual images are frowned upon.

The Cultural Revolution generation does not find the gender/sex related products as offensive as the Red Generation because of the indoctrination they had experienced during the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution period, Chairman Mao proclaimed that 'women

hold half the sky' (Leung, 2003). Under Mao's reconstruction of gender, women are allowed to participate in social production, women are granted the right to challenge male authority within the family, and women can achieve independence through paid labour. The product of this social reconstruction was that women were able to voice their own opinions and challenge the opinions of men. Consequently Cultural Revolution and 'Y' generations do not perceive gender/sex-related products as offensive compared to the Red Generation.

For the category of addictive products, none of the generations found alcohol offensive, and there were no statistical differences with regard to their perception of alcohol and cigarettes. This is because smoking and drinking among the Chinese are accepted and tolerated. Often smoking and drinking are seen as 'luxury' items for peasants and a reward after a hard day's work (Waller and Fam, 2003). Furthermore, alcohol and cigarettes are common items to be given as gifts to celebrate an auspicious day like Spring Festival, celebrating the birth of a child, birthdays of grandparents, weddings and etc. (Fam, Waller and Yang, 2007) Alcohol is the least offensive as it is a ubiquitous product in both the city and the village, and children often grow up watching parents drink to keep themselves warm during the winter months.

For the advertising of Social/political groups, the 'Y' generation found all the items - race, religion and political advertising – more offensive than the other generational cohorts. This could be attributed to their being more highly educated and having exposure to yje international media. As such, they are more conscious of their human rights and obligations. Advertising for these groups could remind them of the consequences of rebelling against the government; further, the 'Y' generation are children of the Cultural Revolution generation, and their parents could remind them of their own experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

While generational backgrounds are important for developing consumer attitudes, consumers' cultural values are regarded as the governing ideas and principles for thought and action in a given society, and are deemed a powerful force for shaping consumers' motivations, lifestyles and product choices (Tse, Belk and Zhou 1989; Srikandath 1991). Chinese consumers are generally more entrenched in eastern (Chinese/Confucian) values; and, therefore, regardless of how 'westernised' a Chinese youth is, he/she will always hold on to his/her cultural values. The values of keeping oneself disinterested and pure, having few desires, respect for tradition, and moderation, i.e. following the middle way and having a sense of shame could explain why all of the generational cohorts were offended by advertisements depicting Indecent language, Hard Sell, Violence and Anti-social Behaviour. While these execution techniques are more related to a social context, the older generations were also offended by Nudity, Racist images, Subject too personal, Stereotyping of people, and Sexist/Sexual images, which relate more to a personal context.

Conclusion

This paper examines generational cohort attitudes toward the advertising of controversial products and advertising execution techniques by analyzing a survey of 630 Chinese consumers in three different generational cohorts (120 between the ages of 15 and 21; 120 between 34 and 56; and 120 over 57 years old). From the results, a number of statistical differences were found between the three groups, notably that the older, conservative Red Generation was more offended than the younger generations, particularly with respect to the advertising of gender/sex related products and some of the advertising execution techniques. However, the younger 'Y' generation was more offended by the advertising of social/political groups. It would appear that the generational cohorts have a strong effect on the attitudes

towards the various controversial products, but while this is also true for the perceptions of the advertising techniques, consumer cultural values also play a very important role.

For international marketers targeting the Chinese market, it is important that they understand the attitudes of Chinese consumers toward controversial products and that they are aware of the execution techniques used in advertising. For those who sell products that could be perceived as controversial should understand that attitudes in the marketplace can vary based on generational cohorts. In addition to attitudes toward advertising, execution techniques must also be given equal attention since certain techniques could evoke negative perceptions among consumers. The last thing an international marketer would want to do is to generate negative publicity by offending people. Further research is therefore recommended on controversial advertising, particularly as to how it can relate to issues such as brand image and purchase intention. Discovering ways to reduce offensiveness is also important, as the advertising of some gender/sex related products can be vital from a community health perspective. This suggests the importance of communication adaptation for international marketers who wish to target the Chinese market since advertisements developed and executed in the West are unlikely to be accepted in China especially if they portray the controversial products. Therefore, it is important for international marketers to devote their resources to gaining a solid understanding of China and its consumers before venturing into this huge and ever-developing market.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Controversial Products

| | Gender/Sex Related Products | Social/Political Groups | Addictive Products |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Female contraceptives | 0.837 | | |
| Female underwear | 0.805 | | |
| Condoms | 0.802 | | |
| Female hygiene products | 0.778 | | |
| | | | |
| Racially extreme groups | | 0.782 | |
| Religious denominations | | 0.777 | |
| Political parties | | 0.732 | |
| | | | |
| Cigarettes | | | 0.836 |
| Alcohol | | | 0.697 |
| Gambling | | | 0.537 |
| | | | |
| Eigen value | 2.724 | 1.903 | 1.493 |
| Percentage of variance | 26.17 | 18.37 | 16.66 |
| Cronbach alpha | 0.83 | 0.67 | 0.57 |

Table 2: Generational Attitudes towards Controversial Products

| | Total | 15-20 yrs old (n=210; Median age:18)^a | 35-56 yrs old (n=210; Median age:45)^b | > 57 yrs old (n=210; Median age:60)^c | F- Value: 0.05* 0.01** |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Gender/Sex Related Products | | | | | |
| Female contraceptives | 3.45 (1.29) | 3.21 ^c (1.23) | 3.32 ^c (1.32) | 3.81 ^{ab} (1.26) | 13.269** |
| Female underwear | 2.76 (1.30) | 2.43 ^c (1.20) | 2.72 ^c (1.29) | 3.12 ^{ab} (1.32) | 15.578** |
| Condoms | 3.34 (1.31) | 3.08 ^c (1.21) | 3.16 ^c (1.34) | 3.78 ^{ab} (1.28) | 18.798** |
| Female hygiene products | 2.95 (1.32) | 2.73 ^c (1.27) | 2.88 ^c (1.28) | 3.25 ^{ab} (1.37) | 8.649** |
| Social/Political Groups | | | | | |
| Racially extreme groups | 3.91 (1.21) | 4.02 (1.12) | 3.89 (1.25) | 3.83 (1.27) | 1.300 |
| Religious denominations | 3.43 (1.24) | 3.67 ^c (1.13) | 3.39 (1.30) | 3.22 ^a (1.24) | 7.176** |
| Political parties | 3.03 (1.34) | 3.25 ^{bc} (1.26) | 2.92 ^a (1.34) | 2.93 ^a (1.33) | 4.174* |
| Addictive Products | | | | | |
| Cigarettes | 3.20 (1.44) | 3.10 (1.41) | 3.18 (1.43) | 3.33 (1.49) | 1.432 |
| Alcohol | 2.27 (1.19) | 2.20 (1.09) | 2.25 (1.19) | 2.35 (1.30) | .773 |
| Gambling | 4.38 (1.02) | 4.25 ^c (1.11) | 4.34 (1.03) | 4.54 ^a (0.88) | 4.479* |

Superscript letters ^{a, b, c} indicate between-generation differences as per Bonferroni *post hoc* tests used in analyses of variance (ANOVA). For example, a number with the superscript ^a indicates a significant difference to the mean response from 15-20 years old, superscript ^b indicates a significant difference to the response from 35-55 years old, and superscript ^c indicates a significant difference to 56 years and above. Standard Deviation is in parenthesis.

Table 3: Generational Attitudes Towards Controversial Executions

| | Total | 15-20 yrs old (n=210; Median age:18)^a | 35-56 yrs old (n=210; Median age:45)^b | > 57 yrs old (n=210; Median age:60)^c | F-Value: 0.05* 0.01** |
|--------------------------|----------------|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Indecent language | 4.47 (0.94) | 4.33 ^c (0.99) | 4.46 (0.94) | 4.60 ^a (0.85) | 4.470* |
| Hard Sell | 4.37 (0.93) | 4.43 (0.81) | 4.28 (1.04) | 4.40 (0.94) | 1.502 |
| Violence | 4.37 (1.00) | 4.17 ^{bc} (1.02) | 4.40 ^a (0.99) | 4.53 ^a (0.95) | 7.398** |
| Anti-social behaviour | 4.13 (1.24) | 4.06 (1.16) | 4.06 (1.32) | 4.26 (1.24) | 1.861 |
| Nudity | 4.10 (1.17) | 3.86 ^c (1.26) | 4.10 (1.14) | 4.33 ^a (1.08) | 8.650** |
| Racist images | 4.03 (1.09) | 3.98 (1.09) | 4.04 (1.10) | 4.07 (1.07) | .415 |
| Subject too personal | 3.99 (1.04) | 3.80 ^c (1.07) | 4.00 (1.00) | 4.17 ^a (1.04) | 6.552* |
| Stereotyping of people | 3.91 (1.06) | 3.92 (1.00) | 3.81 (1.09) | 4.00 (1.09) | 1.605 |
| Sexist/Sexual images | 3.70 (1.26) | 3.43 ^c (1.27) | 3.61 ^c (1.24) | 4.05 ^{ab} (1.20) | 14.159** |
| Western (USA) images | 3.39 (1.28) | 3.25 (1.24) | 3.40 (1.30) | 3.51 (1.29) | 2.314 |
| Health and safety issues | 2.14 (1.17) | 2.21 (1.11) | 2.17 (1.19) | 2.05 (1.21) | 1.083 |
| Concern for children | 1.50 (0.86) | 1.50 (0.82) | 1.56 (0.88) | 1.44 (0.88) | 1.002 |

Superscript letters ^{a, b, c} indicates between generation differences as per Bonferroni *post hoc* tests used in ANOVA. For example, a number with the superscript ^a indicates a significant difference to the mean response from 15-20 years old, superscript ^b indicates a significant difference to the response from 35-55 years old, and superscript ^c indicates a significant difference to 56 years and above. Standard Deviation is in parenthesis.

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