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To engage or not: how does concern for personal brand impact consumers' Social Media Engagement Behaviour (SMEB)?

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ABSTRACT

In the present society, people have become cautious about their online presence. By adopting a qualitative methodological approach, the study investigates consumers' approach to SMEB (Social Media Engagement Behaviour). Through the lens of the personal branding construct, it is understood that people seek to create a satisfying presentation of the desired self. A further concern is to maintain the public's perception of such an identity. Psychological experiences include the negative impact of self-disclosure, social phobia, and concerns for the brand of 'me'. The fear is not being perceived correctly or being associated with controversial opinions in the eye of the target audience that they regard as important. Going beyond career advancement, the study contributes to understand how concerns for personal brand impact Gen Y's SMEB. The findings assist commercial brands in gaining more knowledge of such consumer groups in terms of the future engagement process.

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1. Introduction

Advancement in technology has allowed consumers to partake in various activities on social media (SM). Consequently, several studies are taking interest in investigating online consumer behaviour (OCB) and particularly consumers' motivation for Social Media Engagement Behaviour (SMEB) (Cao et al., 2021; Davydenko & Peetz, 2020). In addition to motivations, existing studies have primarily emphasised the impact of SMEB on the company rather than the consumers (Cao et al., 2021; Dessart, 2017).

Much attributed to the negative sides of social media exposure, many have become sceptical about engagement due to public scrutiny on such platforms (Baccarella et al., 2018; Cao et al., 2021; Fulgoni & Lipsman, 2017). Anyone who engages on SM has created a public profile, one that might have taken years to build and maintain. It is thus stressed that consumers' willingness to engage is beyond an external benefit-oriented and rational 'give' and 'get' mindset. Arguably, it is just as important to understand consumers' psychological experiences in the process (Liu et al., 2019). One way of understanding

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such an experience is through the lens of personal branding. The importance of personal brand has been acknowledged by industry practitioners (Vițelar, 2019; Wetsch, 2012). However, more scholarly attention is necessary as the current discussion is rather fragmented (Gorbatov et al., 2020). Existing research has typically focused on personal branding in the context of career development (Gorbatov et al., 2020; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Wetsch, 2012). Nevertheless, personal brands, which can be built through SMEB, also serve as a way of self-expression (Labrecque et al., 2011). Moreover, the line between private and professional identities has become less evident as people are striving for an authentic presentation of themselves (Gorbatov et al., 2020; Scheidt et al., 2020). This indicates that personal branding goes beyond career advancement.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to investigate how concerns for personal brand and public profile impact consumers' SMEB. Two specific research objectives have been proposed:

- Investigating consumers' psychological experiences when engaging in SMEB
- Understanding personal branding in relation to the adverse effects of SMEB and SM exposure

The study focuses on members of Gen Y as they are considered the first digital natives and the generation to grow up in an environment of digital technology (Prensky, 2001; Thomas, 2011). As Gen Y is a decidedly larger part of the population in many countries with a noteworthy impact on the development of the economy (Werenowska & Rzepka, 2020). Gen Y also shows greater engagement with online communication and always being connected is of high importance (Bento et al., 2018). They value the opinions of others and feel important when they provide feedback about a certain brand experience on SM (Bento et al., 2018; Bolton et al., 2013; Werenowska & Rzepka, 2020). Khan et al. (2021) argue that Gen Y are likely to be loyal to a brand when unique and memorable experiences are gained through engagement. Furthermore, many are presumably in the establishing stages both professionally and privately (aged from 22 to 40). Thus, Gen Y is arguably more concerned about their SM presence and how SMEB may affect the public's perception of their personal brand.

2. Literature review

2.1. Understanding personal branding

Gorbatov et al. (2018, p. 6) define a personal brand as a 'set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into a differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience'. The 'target audience' refers to brands, companies, other consumers, or parties that individuals deem as relevant and important. A personal brand is often developed from the personal image, which is the perception of 'you' held in another person's mind. Compared with other types of branding, personal branding with roots in career development literature is a relatively new term where the discussion is still much fragmented (Gorbatov et al., 2020). Many have criticised the term as being nothing more than a crude way of self-presentation and self-exposure, manifested with the cynicism of

commercialism (Lair et al., 2005; Zarkada, 2012). However, the importance of personal image and reputation is reaffirmed when considering SMEB (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kang et al., 2013; Majali, 2018). In the personal branding process, these concepts encompass how people present themselves in online environments in terms of forming and building a public profile. Subsequently, the discussion on personal branding has been closely linked with impression management (Gorbatov et al., 2018, 2020; Rangarajan et al., 2017), which is how individuals manage other's impressions. Like any other brands, choosing the right positioning strategy is a part of brand management, which equals impression management in the present context. This brings in another criticism of personal branding being too occupied with self-packaging rather than self-improvement (Lair et al., 2005). Nevertheless, such a process is necessary as an online presence is needed to initiate and maintain private and professional relationships online (Paliszkievicz & Madra-Sawicka, 2016).

Through impression management, individuals self-promote and ensure that the desired self is what others in the 'target audience' perceive of them. Thus, personal branding consists of the components, desired self and perceived identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018). One can wish to project the desired self, but the identity that the target audience perceives and reacts to can be vastly different. Furthermore, Khedher (2015) argues that there is a need for self-reflection and feedback-seeking to maintain a personal brand. To close the gap between the desired self and the perceived identity, it is essential to consider others' feedback (Labrecque et al., 2011), which will lead to self-reflection and improvement. Such an argument thus disagrees with the general criticism of personal branding. In such a process, self-awareness, which is to discover one's self-identity and value as well as sensemaking by making sense of the environment through such identity, are all contributing factors to building a strong personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

2.2. Building personal brands through SMEB

Through SMEB, consumers can achieve value by creating their content and social networks (Parihar et al., 2019). While an increasing number of research contributions have provided sound knowledge (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2021; Sanne & Wiese, 2018), they have primarily focused on how media content influences SMEB. There is also a need to understand how SMEB impacts consumers on a more personal and professional level. Going beyond external benefit-oriented motivations, Liu et al. (2019) propose that recognition from peers, community identification, and self-efficacy influence the degree of engagement. While the study is limited to brand communities and focuses largely on the outcome for brands such as brand loyalty, it was realised that SMEB also affects consumers on a more psychological level.

Consumer engagement is a complex term with roots in applied psychology, management, and marketing. In addition to being a motivational construct (Dessart, 2017), engagement is a psychological state that occurs due to the consumer's interactive experience (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Traditionally, engagement is either positive or negative interaction between one or several parties (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). However, since engagement is a context-dependent psychological state, it has fluctuating intensity levels and occurs within dynamic iterative engagement processes (Brodie et al., 2013). While the intensity is of

various degrees, some level of physical, emotional and cognitive 'presence' and energy must be invested in the relationship with the brand (Patterson et al., 2006). Hence, engagement cannot occur subconsciously, although an intensive presence is not required at all times (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Simon, 1987). Additionally, consumer engagement varies from active participation to passive content consumption (Khan, 2017). Passive content consumption consists of likes, whereas active participation involves high and intensive involvement and engagement as it encompasses significant time and energy spent on brand discussions in public arenas (Parihar et al., 2019).

For companies, it is crucial to understand SMEB as high consumer engagement creates stronger brand relationships as well as enhances brand trust, commitment, and loyalty (Dessart, 2017; Khan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2019). Subsequently, leading to high purchase intention and positive reviews of the brand (So et al., 2016). Engagement is also beyond interactions between a consumer and a commercial brand as it also occurs between consumers (Liu et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2006). It is the latter type of engagement that intensifies consumers' concern about how their personal brand is perceived and judged by others.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted to explore how people's lives are shaped and how social order is developed (Payne & Williams, 2005). As limited studies have previously been conducted on how concerns for personal brand and public profile impact consumers' SMEB to date, a study of explorative nature is most suitable. The purpose is not to test theories, but rather to explore and discover possible new ones (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Subsequently, to discover and understand the meaning of people's opinions and behaviour, a hermeneutic and interpretive view was applied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Mehmetoglu, 2004).

3.1. Sample and data collection method

Respondents who are born within Gen Y and those who have extensive experience in SMEB were recruited to provide in-depth answers during the semi-structured interviews. The first criterion ensures that the sample includes respondents with high awareness of SM and potential norms that have evolved on these platforms. This includes being weekly active users of one or more SM platforms. The second criterion was to confirm that the respondents are familiar with engaging on SM and do that regularly within the past week. Third, respondents had to participate in active engagement, high and intensive involvement in brand discussions as explained by Parihar et al. (2019). The final criterion was that respondents need to have open SM profiles to understand their online activities and engagement behaviour. While engagement can occur on a vast number of channels, Facebook and Instagram as two of the most widely used SM platforms were used as the main. The researchers reached out to potential respondents directly on these platforms, based on the observed engagement activities and behaviour online as part of a netnography approach. From then, a snowball method was employed to recruit additional respondents. Although this may lead to homogeneity among the respondents,

Table 1. Details of the respondents.

Respondent	Year of birth	Gender	Interview duration
R1	1995	Male	106 minutes
R2	1996	Female	58 minutes
R3	1993	Female	63 minutes
R4	1995	Female	71 minutes
R5	1995	Female	67 minutes
R6	1995	Male	62 minutes
R7	1995	Male	82 minutes
R8	1996	Female	72 minutes
R9	1996	Female	72 minutes
R10	1990	Male	46 minutes
R11	1981	Male	52 minutes
R12	1986	Male	66 minutes
R13	1990	Female	60 minutes
R14	1983	Female	85 minutes

the snowball approach is useful to compensate for eventual errors or narrowness of the predetermined criteria (Bryman & Burgess, 1999).

Patton (2015) argues that the sample size in qualitative studies is dependent on the research aim, contribution, and resources available. Contrary to quantitative approaches, the depth of the collected data is more important than the numbers (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012) and a saturation point can be achieved as low as five (Ringdal, 2013) when the goal is to understand people's behaviour and their reaction to certain occurrences. After a certain number of interviews, little to no more new information may be obtained and the dataset may become unnecessarily complex (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). Data saturation was believed to have been reached after 10 interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 2000); however, additional interviews were conducted to further strengthen the validity. More information about the respondents is illustrated in Table 1.

Questions in the interview guide were formulated based on existing literature related to SMEB, personal branding, and SM usage and criticism. This serves as a way to ensure validity and reliability. The nature of the interview questions sought to investigate the purpose and nature of engagement, their activities, and experiences. While perfect reliability is difficult to achieve in qualitative studies and semi-structured interviews in particular, a sacrifice in reliability means gains in validity (Patton, 2015). Validity is achieved as the study has managed to measure what has been set out to measure. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored as per guidelines provided by NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) to ensure accuracy and data protection. In addition, member check was applied to ensure the correct meaning of the context and is a further step to ensure validity and reliability. Furthermore, respondents' anonymity was guaranteed by the researchers and the interviews could be terminated at any given time. By providing the declaration of consent to the respondents before the interviews, the need to protect their privacy was satisfied. The information collected through audio was deleted after the end of the project.

3.2. Data analysis

A gradual deductive and inductive analysis was conducted, to code data into manageable codes, categories, and themes. This was further used to develop new concepts based on

empirical findings and theoretical contributions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Tjora, 2012). All researchers participated in the coding process where they worked independently, dividing the interviews between them. Furthermore, an ongoing discussion was maintained during this process to compare and discuss the codes to resolve any inconsistencies. The actual coding process involved classifying a large amount of the text data into fewer topics. First-order codes were extracted based on three criteria presented by Tuli et al. (2007): 1) insight applicable beyond a specific context, 2) multiple participants mentioned the idea, and 3) the idea goes beyond the 'obvious' and can provide more interesting conclusions. An initial analysis of the dataset provided 97 first-order codes. To reduce this number, the codes were re-coded based on similarities and differences (Gioia et al., 2013; Tjora, 2012) and resulted in 22 first-order codes. Then, the first-order codes were inductively developed into six second-order groups, with the main ambition of building the foundation for the analysis (Tjora, 2012). In the last phase, three aggregated themes were developed to build the final empirical foundation used in the discussion with previous theoretical contributions.

4. Result and discussion

Gorbatov et al. (2018) personal branding model has been adapted to integrate the findings, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

4.1. Self-Disclosure through Engagement

The findings indicate that being associated with certain content is a type of self-disclosure and thus it became evident that the nature of the content dictates respondents' SMEB

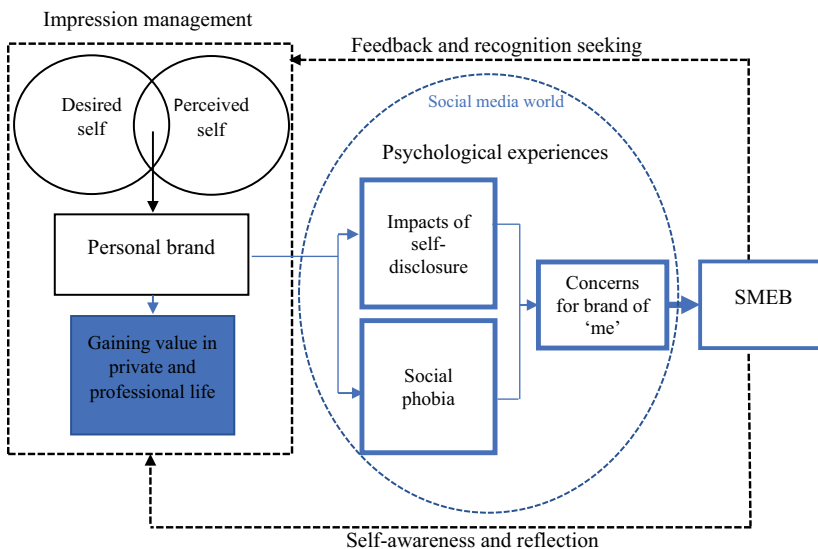


Figure 1. Understanding SMEB through personal branding. Source: Adapted from Gorbatov et al. (2018)

(Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2021). This is, in particular, relevant to the content that is perceived as 'controversial' or 'polarising' or either positive or negative in the end.

... because things are very black and white these days, it's either or. You're either an opponent of it or you're rooting for plastic surgery (for instance). Let's say you partially agree with both sides, like seeing both points of view in a debate ... it's hard to find a place in between and thereafter, place yourself in the middle ... it (R8).

Self-disclosure usually occurs through own produced content on SM to achieve certain interpersonal goals (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). However, the findings indicate that self-disclosure is not only relevant to self-produced content such as selfies, self-recordings, and own statements (Arpaci, 2020; Luo & Hancock, 2020). Supporting or engaging with other people's content is also a part of self-disclosure. This is relevant to the bystander effect, where some individuals seek not to have an opinion. The reason being they do not want to disclose or unintentionally self-reveal details about themselves (Fischer et al., 2011). Luo and Hancock (2020) argue that self-disclosure on social media has serious implications for psychological well-being if not planned strategically.

It also became evident that content sharing of ephemeral nature is more prevalent. These include, for instance, stories on Instagram or Snapchat, which are only visible temporary. Coherent with Villaespesa and Wowkoych (2020), ephemeral content is rather 'raw' and requires less perfection and careful consideration. As such, personal opinions will only be disclosed for a limited time.

I'm more careful with what I post, as it should be something I can stand behind for a longer period, like a selfie. Yes, this is what my face looks like and it'll most likely look like this for another year, but if I post on my story it could be the kind of food I eat or what I do that might not be relevant in a year from now. I can post the content nobody would care about a year from now (R4).

When I was younger, when Facebook became a thing, I used to like all kinds of things, comment on all kinds of things and post all kinds of things. Then one day I realised whatever I posted or liked 10 years ago was still online! I just googled myself for fun and I found a comment on a brand I made years ago. I don't necessarily wanna be associated with something that I talked about years ago today ... (R13).

Bayer et al. (2016) stress that content of ephemeral nature lessens concern regarding self-disclosure and thus increases more willingness to engage. Nevertheless, some insist that the temporary nature of ephemeral content does not matter.

Everything you share, it's always out there in a way, someplace, forever. If I were to share an opinion in a comment section or share something that may be radical, it'll be out there, and someone I know has seen it. These people will remember it, and it'll be out there no matter what, and it's easy to mess up and hard to retract. Because even if you delete it, it'll still be out there because someone has seen it (R6).

The concern is not being able to correct oneself after a statement is made. The respondents reminisced a phase of life where their SMEB does not reflect how they seek to be perceived today. This is relevant to the fear of social isolation, which could be experienced if statements are wrongfully communicated or misinterpreted, leading to individuals withdrawing from SM interactions (Chen, 2018).

Once bitten, twice shy. Because I've lived through the rise of the Internet, I've in many ways seen things go wrong, people getting burned, and because of that, I'm very careful when actually expressing myself in public forums on the Internet because I've seen so many get burned (R7).

I feel like when we grew up and SM came there were no rules, or there were no trends on how to use it, so we experimented a lot. And . . . I don't know . . . Now we've all been through a very awkward phase on SM when nobody knew what was ok to post (R9).

This is also related to ostracism, which is the act of some individuals or groups being excluded or pushed out of certain circles to 'cancel' that person. It started as voicing an opinion about socially unacceptable behaviour towards celebrities, but has since come to affect anyone with an online presence (Ng, 2020; Williams, 2002). The fear of being 'cancelled' is related to one's psychological well-being as argued by Luo and Hancock (2020) as people seek to belong (Sicilia et al., 2016). This further explains the issue of social phobia.

4.2. Social phobia

Social phobia is understood as a strong desire to convey a particularly favourable impression of oneself to others while having insecurity about their ability to do so (Clark & Wells, 1995). It is the concern of not being able to create a satisfying presentation of the desired self and is closely related to the fear of social rejection (Burtäverde et al., 2019; Rochat, 2009).

In a way, you expose yourself and put yourself in a vulnerable position where there's the chance of being judged. And there's that, do I get enough likes on this photo, it's a real thing . . . There's the fear of few people liking your photo (R3).

I seldom post and engage with anything nowadays. I'm afraid to leave any evidence that may give people a wrong impression. I like to read all the comments and follow the stuff I like and am online all the time! I just don't have the energy to reveal myself you know what I mean. The few times I do post or engage in something, when I see I don't get any response, I'll delete it (R14)!

As discussed, feedback-seeking is an important element in the personal branding process to close the gap between the desired self and perceived identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011). Related to the discussion of self-disclosure, people are likely to disclose information about themselves if have a high chance of being favourably received by others (Schlosser, 2020). Moreover, the feedback received on SM is related to social cues in real life. Should a person be confident in the recognition they receive from peers in real life, they may not seek further acknowledgement on SM (Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2011; Stănculescu, 2011). Not getting noticed or attracting negative attention thus counteract the willingness to engage and further enhance social phobia. It is however more complex as it depends on whether the recognition is from an important target audience as it is about being relevant to their audience and avoiding social rejection (Burtäverde et al., 2019). This is mostly related to how one is perceived by others, leading to concerns for their personal brand.

4.3. Concerns for the brand of 'me'

Building and developing a public 'persona', and a certain 'presentation of myself' were different phrases that emerged. They all fall into the same category of the original statement revolving around concerns for the brand of 'me'.

I'm, generally in life, quite aware of how it [behaviour online] affects the brand 'me'. I often think about how others perceive me as a person. Whether you think about it or not, there're characteristics that represent people in the same way as brands (R1).

There's a persona you present on SM ... I think it can be compared to how you present yourself at a job interview. For example, you want to display your good sides, but maybe not the sides that aren't as charming (R4).

Too much presence or being too active is not necessarily regarded as something positive.

The more you share, you use up a kind of quota for sharing within a certain period. If you share a lot, you'll be noticed less because ... Or you might be noticed, but people ... they're fed up with what the person has to say (R7).

I don't want to have my name under many brands. A like can always be defended by saying [that] you mislicked or that it wasn't conscious. If you, on the other hand, go in and comment on something, it's far more of a statement ... (R10).

Related to the discussion above, sharing too much can have adverse effects on their psychological well-being (Luo & Hancock, 2020). It is thus not surprising that a significant number of people choose to hide certain online activities from specific people or organisations, such as employers and colleagues (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). This raises another issue of anonymity, as remaining anonymous allows the respondents to express themselves openly without affecting their personal brand (Schlesinger et al., 2017; Schlosser, 2020).

I don't talk about it openly ... I actually have another profile online I use. ... to engage with things I think clash with my other persona. It's nothing bad ... , but I'm actually very into luxury and expensive stuff on one hand, but I don't think it quite matches with my daytime job. People might think I'm materialist and superficial so I kinda keep that part of me hidden (R12).

Anonymity is also related to the discussion of self-disclosure as being anonymous can prevent their personal brand from being affected by ensuring a certain level of control and privacy. People are more willing to share controversial content when being anonymous (Chen & Berger, 2013; Schlosser, 2020), as it provides more comfort when engaging (Bachmann et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2013). Despite some concerns, anonymity was not actively sought after as anonymity also prevents personal brand building altogether, particularly when they seek to project an authentic self to the public (Gorbatov et al., 2020; Scheidt et al., 2020). Furthermore, anonymity may lead to people losing self-consciousness as a part of deindividuation (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Schlosser, 2020). Instead, as discussed, the respondents are rather selective in the type of content that they want to be associated with and the level of their activity and presence on SM. Thus, self-awareness and reflection are constantly present during any SMEB, as an attempt to maintain a level of control of their brand of 'me'.

5. Conclusion

This study presents several theoretical contributions by examining the topic through the personal branding construct beyond external benefit-oriented motivations. Firstly, SMEB is a much more complex phenomenon than previously assumed. Self-disclosure, by not only producing own content but also by supporting others' content plays a prominent role in the fear of social rejection. It is about creating a wrong impression of oneself, which is not easily retractable in the world of SM. This leads to negative impacts on the personal brand and also takes a toll on individuals' psychological well-being, which is enhanced by social phobia. Thus, personal branding and social phobia are closely interlinked and should be considered as such. Essentially, future engagement behaviour is dictated by such self-awareness and reflection that are arguably present during any SMEB. Secondly, due to the psychological experiences occurring when engaging on SM, the impact of projecting an undesired image of oneself is not limited to individuals' professional life. When the personal branding process is properly managed through impression management, value will also be gained in their private life, as the authentic self is a combination of both private and professional identities (Gorbatov et al., 2020; Scheidt et al., 2020). This further enhances the discussion of the personal branding construct to be extended beyond career development discipline.

In terms of practical and managerial implications, companies seeking to engage with Gen Y need to understand that their approach to SMEB is more complex than previously known. Consequently, although commercial brands may attempt to encourage SMEB by providing media-rich and relevant content (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2021), consumers' reluctance may still exist if they believe that being associated with the content has an adverse effect on their personal brand. With such knowledge in mind, being present on all SM platforms does not necessarily encourage higher engagement. Companies seeking to build their brand through engagement need to understand the complexity of such engagement behaviour and thus create the appropriate content accordingly. While not all consumers are concerned with personal branding when engaging online, particularly in lower and more passive types of engagement, others with a more prominent presence on SM will arguably think twice.

As this study has primarily focused on Gen Y in a western context, more studies should seek to include other consumer groups and consider cultural differences within such groups. The current study has set the precedent for possible future studies including a need to investigate how psychological experiences impact the various types and levels of SMEB. Demographic variables such as educational background, gender, and other cultural influences should also be included in more comprehensive studies to gain a better understanding of the issues at hand.

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