

## COMPETENCIES OF SERVICE PROVIDERS IN RELIGIOUS PLACES: A CASE STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS TOURISM INDUSTRY IN KARBALA

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### Abstract

Failure to provide services can lead to negative coping behaviors in service recipients, but the perception of the competencies of service providers can reduce such destructive behaviors. Hence, the purpose of this research is to identify the dimensions of required competencies for tourism service providers in religious tourism's environments in order to prevent the negative behavior of pilgrims (such as revenge and avoidance) in dealing with service failure. This research is a descriptive-exploratory applied research. The statistical population of the study is the religious tourists of Karbala city in the period of July to December 2023, and the research data was collected based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with non-random/ convenient sampling method from 60 religious tourists. The interviews were coded and categorized by thematic analysis method. The findings showed that the following competencies in religious tourism environments -without regarding the order they are placed in- can lead to the reduction of service failure and negative coping behaviors: Practical efficiency; Ability to adapt to the work environment; Adaptability to breakthroughs; Interpersonal skills; Ability to manage time; Problem-solving skills; Reception and etiquette skills; Honesty and privacy in the work environment; Providing help and support.

**Keywords:** Competencies; Service providers, Religious tourism, Karbala

### Introduction

Among the service industries, the tourism industry is one of the leading and growing sectors at the international level (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011) and has been recognized by the United Nations as one of the 10 sectors influencing the green economy (W. T. O , 2013). So that at the global level, the number of domestic and foreign tourists and their income generation is constantly increasing (W.T.O, 2005).

And according to predictions, the demand for international tourism will reach 1.6 billion people per year by 2020 (Coshall et al., 2011). The positive point in the macro planning for the development of the tourism industry is the special attention to the development of human resources in this industry (Khodae, & kalantari khalilabad,

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2013), while many tourism programs for the development of destination areas give little importance to the development of human resources. In addition, many tourism programs support forms of tourism that are not compatible with the capabilities of existing human resources (Liu and Wall, 2006). Since the tourism industry is basically a service activity, therefore, service providers are considered a part of the product, and therefore, the amount of theoretical knowledge and familiarity of people with professional skills is the guarantee of their good performance in order to achieve the goals of this industry. It is clear that with the development of tourism and the more complex needs and expectations of the applicants, the suppliers in this industry must also face this demand, for this purpose the training of the employees is necessary to guarantee the quality of the services and ultimately the satisfaction of the tourists (Edgell et al., 2008).

Examining the factors affecting progress and development in various advanced societies shows that all these countries, in addition to suitable infrastructure and tourism potential, also have capable and efficient educational, professional and educational institutions (Shamsoddini et al., 2015). Neglecting the training of specialized human resources and providing them with the necessary training, as well as neglecting the coordination and matching of the qualitative-quantitative level of human resources with the level of scientific-technical development, or in other words, the empowerment of human resources, creates many problems for the growth and development of the tourism industry. (Hasanpour, 2013). In the service delivery process, there is a possibility of inadequacies, errors, mistakes, and dissatisfactions, and failure in providing services is inevitable, and recovery of such encounters is considered an important challenge for service companies; Because providing inappropriate service quality causes customers to withdraw from service providers. And this means terminating his relationship with the organization and his approach towards other suppliers. As a result, identifying and understanding the cause of customer dissatisfaction with services is a condition for business survival in a competitive situation, one of the reasons of which can be the failure of service quality, which leads to the creation of a negative attitude in customers (Nejati and Rahchamani, 2016).

Religious tourism is the most popular type of tourism in Iraq. Tens of millions of tourists from different countries visit Iraq's religious places every year. Therefore, it is necessary that religious service providers in Iraq have special competencies to satisfy international religious tourists. We have tried to identify and introduce these special competencies in the present research.

### Theoretical Foundations of Research

#### Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is one in which people move from one location to another for religious reasons. Therefore, it understands that religious tourism is considered a sacred market and that it provides a positive well-being for those who visit and for those who are visited. Calvelli (2009) explains Ribeiro (2010) explains that tourism covers trips made for religious reasons, because, regardless of the motivation, travelers use the same equipment, and products and services are generated to meet their expectations. To support the emphasis Silveira (2007) mentions that religious tourism moves pilgrims on journeys through the mysteries of faith or devotion to a saint. In practice, they organize trips to sacred places, events related to evangelization, periodic religious festivals, and religious performances. It is observed that religious tourism is one of the fastest-growing types of tourism, whether due to mystical or dogmatic aspects, as many visitors travel huge distances to meet the sacred.

The notion of religious tourism develops from an understanding of tourist motivations. The difference between this form of tourism and others lies in the religious motivation, which is the reason for the displacement. A criterion related to the destination area can be established, where elements of a religious nature predominate (Ribeiro, 2010).

Jesus (2019) states that John Paul II, in 1986, presented tourism as a bearer of values, thus being a means of responding to the anxieties of the spirit that every human being can obtain when performing this type of displacement. In this understanding, tourism is understood as something greater than simple consumer enjoyment. It also understands that religious tourism is intended to seek spiritual values, which can lead human beings to peace with themselves and especially before God. Silveira (2007, p. 35) confirms that religious tourism related to pilgrimages is associated with the intimate, with the interior of each being, of living a more playful experience of fun, and lightness, among others. In this way, tourism refers to the production of the spectacle in which tourists externalize themselves in a relationship not to know the other, but to establish a better definition of themselves, which also occurs with their past. But religion can also be understood as spectacle, entertainment, vision, and exteriority such as colors and symbols. Therefore, this type of tourism allows an experience with the sacred, which provides a sense of personal well-being.

One of the characteristics of religious tourism is that it allows people to find meaning in existence, for this reason, people travel to centers to raise their religious beliefs and to find themselves at peace with themselves, in other words, it is a mystical exercise in celebration. that every pilgrimage creates and encourages a varied field of religious and interreligious, cultural and intercultural relations, in a comprehensive system of cultural and economic Exchange.

**Competence of employees (tourism service providers)**

One of the important factors involved in gaining a competitive advantage in the service sector is human resources; Because the employees of the service department interact with their customers to provide services, and it is the quality of this interaction that leads to competitive advantage and differentiation between different organizations. Meanwhile, empowerment has emerged as a well-known tool to increase the ability of employees in organizations, which can guarantee the success of the organization. Despite the general trend of empowerment in service companies, there are still some uncertainties about the impact of empowerment and even about what actually happens (Jafarinaia & Darvishon Nejad, 2014). In the tourism industry, it is an unavoidable principle to train specialized and qualified workforce to provide high quality services. Today, with the growing number of tourists, the tourism sector is forced to improve the skills of its employees so that it cannot only meet the expectations of customers, but also exceed them. The researchers state that: the concept of competence includes many different departments and fields of studies and these studies have led to the identification and formation of different approaches and models of competence. There are two main approaches to competencies in the research literature: strategic approach at the organizational level (including tasks, processes and organizational workflows), and the approach of human resources at the individual level (including: basic indicators related to work such as: skills, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and characteristics); These approaches are very closely related to each other (Mohammadi et al., 2017). The current research has examined the approach of human resources at the individual level.

**Models of Competency**

There are several competency models in the literature. Researchers have divided these models into two main parts: general model and specific organizational model; General models are considered for the complete classification of employees and industries, as well as special organizational models that emphasize the complex needs of an organization. General models can be used as a starting point for the development of a specific organizational model in any type of organization. Among the human resource competency models that exist in the field of tourism, the following can be mentioned:

The competency model by Kim et al. (2011) for hotel employees with dimensions of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, and motivation. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) competency model (2012), for hotel employees with dimensions of general competencies and functional competencies in the form of skills, knowledge, and attitude-behavior. Kamau & Waudoo's (2012) competency model, for managers' expectations of employees' competencies including dimensions (basic skills, good attitude, receptive training, interpersonal relationships, creativity, technical skills, and information technology skills), Liaman's competency model (2014), for hotel employees with dimensions of skill, specialization, ability and talent, Shiri and Yousefi's competency model (2013), for managers with managerial, personality, professional, decision-making, team, perceptive, leadership and ethical dimensions. The conceptual model of competence of Dembovska, & Silicka (2015), to provide high-quality services in the hotel industry, includes the dimensions of personal characteristics: knowledge, skills, values, motivations, and enthusiasm. Morteza's competency model (2015), for employees with the dimensions of decision-making skills, social competence, basic knowledge, human relations, professional skills, and leadership skills. and the model of Weinland et al (2016) for leisure managers, including perceptual and creative dimensions, mutual relations, leadership, technical, and executive.

The task of employees who are related to knowledge, skills and attitudes is a worrying situation for the effective and efficient functioning of various organizational functions. In addition, human resources development methods probably strengthen the perception of membership and commitment of employees to the organization, which themselves lead to an increase in their efforts to achieve organizational goals beyond the minimum work requirement. The higher level and quality of in-role and extra-role task efforts determined by the increased competence and commitment of employees causes the effectiveness of organizational performance.

**Research Background**

Teixeira et al (2021). Investigated the "Religious tourism in municipalities in the state of Amazonas".

Siti et al. (2011) describe Islamic tourism in Malaysia in their research.

Suleiman and Mohammad (2011) in their article entitled the effect of factors affecting the religious tourism market, a case study of the Palestinian territories, show the importance of religious tourism in Palestine. This article concludes that Palestine is unique due to its history, cultural heritage, geographical location, environment and religions.

Duman (2011) provides an overview of the Halal tourism market in Turkey in his article.

Alizadehsani et al. (2020). Investigate the "Coping behavior of tourists during service failure: the role of perceived competency of human resources".

After reviewing the literature and emphasizing the importance of service providers' competencies in the religious tourism sector, the research question is:

- What do tourists expect from service providers in a religious tourism environment? In other words, what competencies should service providers in religious tourism environments have?

**Methodology**

The approach of this study is qualitative because it deals with an in-depth analysis of the research topic, which aims to analyze the main competencies of religious tourism service providers.

In terms of methodological goals, an exploratory and descriptive study has been considered. An exploration to seek a deeper understanding of the subject, which differentiates it to work with the importance of service provider competencies related to religious tourism. Descriptive is to describe the causes of phenomena related to specific goals. The data collection process is to use primary data derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with religious tourists. The statistical population of the study is the religious tourists of Karbala city in the period of July to December 2023, and non-random/convenient sampling method from 60 religious tourists. The interviews were coded and categorized by thematic analysis method. To measure validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) method was used, and to measure reliability of coding, two coder reliability method was used.

**Findings**

**Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

In this part, concerning the competencies of religious tourism service providers in Iraq, in-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted until reaching theoretical saturation. The respondents' demographic characteristics are presented in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of qualitative interviews.

Nick name	Country	Gender	Age	Marital status	Education
1	Iraq - Babylon	Male	more than 50 y	Married	Under Diploma
2	Iraq - Babylon	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Master
3	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	under 20 years	single	Under Diploma
4	Iraq - Kirkuk	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
5	Iraq - Baghdad	Female	31 - 40 years	Single	Diploma
6	Bahrain	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Bachelor's
7	Bahrain	Female	more than 50 y	Married	Under Diploma
8	Iraq - Diwaniyah	Female	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
9	Iraq - Babylon	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Bachelor's
10	Kuwait	Female	more than 50 y	Married	Bachelor's
11	Iran	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Under Diploma
12	Iraq - Najaf	Female	31 - 40 years	single	Bachelor's
13	Iraq - Baghdad	Female	more than 50 y	Married	Diploma
14	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
15	Iraq - Dhi Qar	Male	21 - 30 years	Married	Diploma
16	Iraq - Kirkuk	Male	21 - 30 years	Married	Under Diploma
17	Iraq - Kirkuk	Male	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
18	Iraq - Diyala	Male	under 20 years	single	Under Diploma
19	Iraq - Najaf	Female	31 - 40 years	single	Master
20	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Bachelor's
21	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	more than 50 y	Married	Diploma
22	Iraq - Basra	Female	21 - 30 years	single	Bachelor's
23	Iraq - Basra	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Bachelor's
24	Iraq - Diwaniyah	Female	21 - 30 years	single	Diploma
25	Iraq - Babylon	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
26	Iraq - Baghdad	Female	more than 50 y	Married	Bachelor's
27	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
28	Iraq - Diyala	Male	31 - 40 years	single	Bachelor's
29	Iraq - Diyala	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Diploma
30	Iraq - Basra	Female	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
31	Iran	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Under Diploma
32	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	more than 50 y	single	Under Diploma

33	Iraq - Dhi Qar	Female	31 - 40 years	Married	Master
34	Iraq -Najaf	Male	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
35	Iraq -Najaf	Male	21 - 30 years	Married	Diploma
36	Iraq - Basra	Male	31 - 40 years	single	Bachelor's
37	Iraq - Basra	Male	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
38	Iraq - Dhi Qar	Male	more than 50 y	Married	Bachelor's
39	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	more than 50 y	Married	Under Diploma
40	Iraq -Najaf	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
41	Iraq - Babylon	Female	41 - 50 years	single	Diploma
42	Iraq - Babylon	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
43	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Doctorate
44	Iraq - Diwaniyah	Female	21 - 30 years	Married	Diploma
45	Iraq - Basra	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Bachelor's
46	Iran	Male	31 - 40 years	Married	Bachelor's
47	Iraq - Baghdad	Female	21 - 30 years	single	Diploma
48	Iraq - Maysan	Female	21 - 30 years	Married	Under Diploma
49	Iraq - Maysan	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Under Diploma
50	Iraq - Dhi Qar	Female	more than 50 y	Married	Under Diploma
51	Iraq -Najaf	Male	21 - 30 years	single	Bachelor's
52	Iraq -Najaf	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
53	Iraq - Babylon	Female	31 - 40 years	single	Doctorate
54	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	under 20 years	single	Under Diploma
55	Iraq - Baghdad	Male	21 - 30 years	Married	Diploma
56	Iraq - Maysan	Male	41 - 50 years	Married	Bachelor's
57	Iraq - Basra	Female	31 - 40 years	Married	Master
58	Iraq -Najaf	Female	41 - 50 years	Married	Diploma
59	Iraq - Baghdad	Female	21 - 30 years	single	Bachelor's
60	Iraq - Basra	Female	31 - 40 years	single	Bachelor's

**Analyzing the data: Thematic Analysis (TA)**

TA is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Identifying unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences found only within a single data item is not the focus of TA. This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about, and of making sense of those commonalities.

However, what is common is not necessarily in and of itself meaningful or important. The patterns of meaning that TA allows the researcher to identify need to be important in relation to the particular topic and research question being explored. Analysis produces the answer to a question, even if, as in some qualitative research, the specific question that is being answered only becomes apparent through the analysis. There are numerous patterns that could be identified across any dataset - the purpose of analysis is to identify those relevant to answering a particular research question. For instance, in researching white collar workers' experiences of sociality at work, a researcher might interview people about their work environment, and start with questions about their typical work day. If most or all reported that they started work at around 9am, this would be a pattern in the data, but it wouldn't necessarily be a meaningful or important one. However, if many reported that they aimed to arrive at work earlier than they needed to, to chat to colleagues, this could be a meaningful pattern.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows the researcher to focus on the data in numerous different ways. With TA you can legitimately focus on analyzing meaning across the entire dataset, or you can examine one particular aspect of a phenomenon in depth. You can report the obvious or semantic meanings in the data, or you can interrogate the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The many forms thematic analysis can take means that it suits a wide variety of research questions and research topics.

**4-3-1-1-Coding the phrases extracted from the interviews**

Generally, thematic analysis has two stages including open and axial coding. In the open coding phase, the label / concept or open code is assigned to the phrase which is related to the research question, and the axial coding is to compare and find similarities among the open codes and classify them into a group under the title of category. Both stages are done in the table below Table 2.

During the interviews, concepts were extracted from the interviews and placed in their respective categories. This process progressed until the extraction of concepts was met with theoretical saturation and no new concepts were extracted (Table 2).

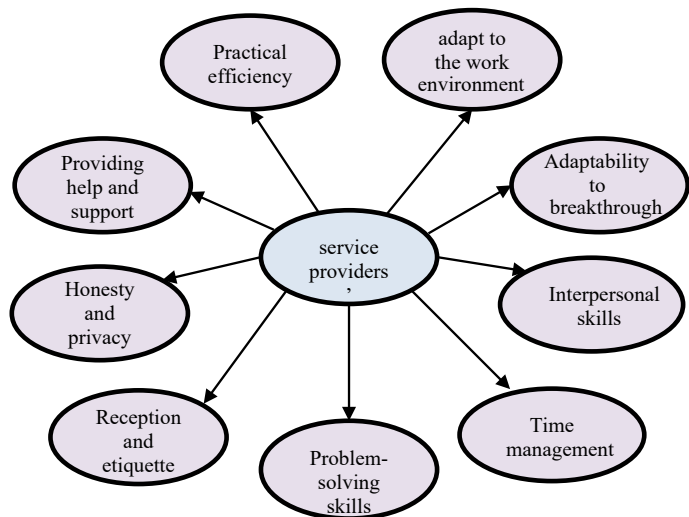
**Table 2.** Dimensions and Indicators extracted from data coding:

Employee Competencies	
Dimension	Indicator
Dimension 1: Practical efficiency	Being efficient and organized
	Experienced in providing services
	Having a certificate and education related to the nature of their work
	Keeping up with progress and technology
	Teamwork oriented
Dimension 2: Ability to adapt to the work environment	Flexible in performing work
	Understanding the visitors' needs
	Good behavior and tact
	Effective communication skills
	Adherence to politeness, proper appearance, and wearing the specified uniform
Dimension 3: Adaptability to breakthroughs	Observance of personal hygiene
	Compatibility with the nature and work environment
	ability to make appropriate decisions
	Adaptability to quick and sudden changes
Dimension 4: Interpersonal skills	Patience and ability to deal with and make decisions
	Ability to withstand difficult conditions
	Humane dealing and honesty in doing business
	Tolerate criticism
Dimension 5: Ability to manage time	Respectful, calm and decent interaction with visitors
	The ability to persuade and professionalism in performing work
	Ability to work overtime
	Respecting the pilgrims' time
	Time management
Dimension 6: Problem-solving skills	Completing work within the specified times
	Adherence to official working hours
	The ability to identify a problem and then solve it
	Ability to deal with unexpected challenges such as flight delays or emergencies
	The ability to deal with challenges rationally
Dimension 7: Reception and etiquette skills	Helping visitors find their loved ones (children, for example) and lost items in crowds
	Trying to solve problems and provide support as soon as possible
	The ability to think creatively and find innovative solutions to problems
	Organizing the arrival and departure of visitors
Dimension 8: Honesty and privacy in the work environment	Having good manners and hospitality
	Proficiency in other languages
	Accepting different nationalities with warmth and interest
	Knowledge of Sharia rulings related to worship and religious rituals
	Honesty in performing job duties
	Protection of confidential and personal information
	Adherence to privacy and security policies
	Knowledge of security procedures
Check the authenticity of the documents	
Dimension 9: Providing help and support	Storage of visitors' luggage
	Applying the security procedures properly
	Compliance with rules and regulations
	Providing reliable and factual information
Dimension 9: Providing help and support	Answer phone calls at all times
	Providing support and assistance to people with special needs (such as the elderly and disabled) and understanding their needs
	Assisting in a cooperative spirit

### Competencies dimensions of service providers in Religious Tourism

Figure 1, shows dimensions of service providers' competencies in religious tourism environment without regard for the order they are placed in. as you see there are 9 dimensions including:

Dimension 1: Practical efficiency; Dimension 2: Ability to adapt to the work environment; Dimension 3: Adaptability to breakthroughs; Dimension 4: Interpersonal skills; Dimension 5: Ability to manage time; Dimension 6: Problem-solving skills; Dimension 7: Reception and etiquette skills; Dimension 8: Honesty and privacy in the work environment; Dimension 9: Providing help and support (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of service providers' competencies in religious tourism environment

Source: author's findings

### Discussion and Conclusion

Failure to provide services can lead to negative coping behaviors in service recipients, but the perception of the competencies of service providers can reduce such destructive behaviors. Hence, the purpose of this research is to identify the dimensions of required competencies for tourism service providers in religious tourism environments to prevent the negative behavior of pilgrims (such as revenge and avoidance) in dealing with service failure.

Religious tourism is the most popular type of tourism in Iraq. Tens of millions of tourists from different countries visit Iraq's religious places every year. Therefore, religious service providers in Iraq must have special competencies to satisfy international religious tourists. We have tried to identify and introduce these special competencies in the present research. after interviewing 60 pilgrims in Karbala, the following service providers' competencies have been extracted -without regarding the order they are placed in- that can lead to the reduction of service failure and negative coping behaviors: Practical efficiency; Ability to adapt to the work environment; Adaptability to breakthroughs; Interpersonal skills; Ability to manage time; Problem-solving skills; Reception and etiquette skills; Honesty and privacy in the work environment; Providing help and support.

Kim et al. (2011) designed a questionnaire to measure the competence of employees, which has three dimensions: ability (17 items), knowledge (8 items) and skill (12 items). Compared to the work of Kim et al., the present study has 9 dimensions, in addition to covering the above three dimensions, it has a special emphasis on welcoming skills, etiquette, honesty, and privacy in the workplace. Also, the results of the present study are in line with Alizadeh et al.'s (2020) research in terms of the importance of the competence of tourism service providers in recreational tourism environments, with the difference that the present study deals with the dimensions of competence in the religious tourism environment.

as mentioned in the theoretical foundation there are several competency models which are in the field of organization and hospitality including:

The competency model by Kim et al. (2011) for hotel employees with dimensions of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, and motivation. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) competency model (2012), for hotel employees with dimensions of general competencies and functional competencies in the form of skills, knowledge, and attitude-behavior. Kamau & Waudou's (2012) competency model, for managers' expectations of employees' competencies including dimensions (basic skills, good attitude,

receptive training, interpersonal relationships, creativity, technical skills, and information technology skills), Liaman's competency model (2014), for hotel employees with dimensions of skill, specialization, ability and talent, Shiri and Yousefi's competency model (2013), for managers with managerial, personality, professional, decision-making, team, perceptive, leadership and ethical dimensions. The conceptual model of competence of Dembovska, & Silicka (2015), to provide high-quality services in the hotel industry, includes the dimensions of personal characteristics: knowledge, skills, values, motivations, and enthusiasm. Morteza's competency model (2015), for employees with the dimensions of decision-making skills, social competence, basic knowledge, human relations, professional skills, and leadership skills. and the model of Weinland et al (2016) for leisure managers, including perceptual and creative dimensions, mutual relations, leadership, technical, and executive.

the context of abovementioned competency models demonstrates that a very few researches present a competency model, pattern or framework in the context of religious tourism environments. hence the findings of this research can be useful and practical for such demanding places.

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