

From Custodians to Facilitators: A Participatory Framework for Co-Curating Ephemeral Heritage in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper investigates the role of integrated librarianship in transforming academic libraries from static repositories ("custodians") to active sites of cultural embedding ("facilitators"). It aims to address the structural disconnect between rigid institutional archives and grassroots community collections by proposing a scalable framework for co-curation.

Design/methodology/approach: The research employs a longitudinal, mixed-methods single-case study of the Kollezzjoni Programmi tal-Festa (KPF) at the University of Malta. Data collection combines qualitative semi-structured interviews with key community informants alongside a quantitative analysis of access metrics from the OAR@UM institutional repository to measure the impact of community-driven metadata in a digital environment.

Findings: The study reveals that "Cultural Warrant" significantly outperforms standardized cataloging; items enriched with Local Subject Headings (LSH) drove a 329% spike in engagement during local events. Furthermore, the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) validates that community participation is driven by a "reciprocal calculation," where institutional transparency (e.g., the *Rendikont*) acts as an essential social reward.

Originality/value: This paper bridges the "gap in praxis" between theoretical post-custodialism and operational reality. It uniquely quantifies the value of integrating community expertise into digital workflows, providing an empirically grounded model for institutionalizing trust-based archival partnerships.

Keywords: Integrated librarianship; Academic libraries; Community co-curation; Social Exchange Theory (SET); Cultural Warrant; Local Subject Headings (LSH); Post-custodialism.

1. Introduction

The role of the academic library is undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift. Historically defined by a custodial model, where professionals exclusively collect, categorize, and gatekeep knowledge, libraries face a new pressure: to stop guarding history and start helping communities save it. (Huvila, 2008). This shift is particularly urgent in the context of ephemeral heritage, often classified as grey literature. In Malta, the festa programme, a booklet produced annually for village feasts, constitutes a significant repository of social and cultural history. Yet, despite its local importance, it has traditionally sat awkwardly within academic collections. Too parochial for international cataloguing standards and too ephemeral for conventional archival prioritization, these materials risk drifting into obscurity.

This paper examines the Kollezjoni Programmi tal-Festa (KPF), a digitization initiative at the Junior College Library (JCL), a branch library of the University of Malta Library (UML), which operationalizes the cultural embedding and the post-custodial shift in practice. Rather than treating feast programmes as static objects to be processed exclusively by professionals, the KPF frames them as sites of negotiation between the institution and the public. By integrating community governance bodies (band clubs) into the curation workflow, the model exemplifies integrated librarianship, where service delivery and community engagement are inextricably linked

However, this transition is not merely philosophical; it presents concrete technical and social challenges. In an era of rapid digital transformation, technical interoperability must be matched by cultural interoperability, ensuring that digital systems reflect the diverse user communities they serve. How can an academic library reconcile the demands of international metadata standards, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), with the hyper-local vocabulary embedded in village feast traditions? And how can an institution persuade a historically skeptical public to entrust personal and parish materials to a formal academic archive?

To address these questions, this study draws on two complementary streams of analysis conducted at the University of Malta (UM). First, it employs quantitative access statistics from OAR@UM, the UM's institutional repository, to evaluate the impact of Cultural Warrant, specifically through the implementation of Local Subject Headings (LSH). The LSH are a crucial tool in indexing material from these festa publications. They differ from folksonomies because they rely on a mixture of cultural, literary and user warrant for the terminology used, and for LCSH for their structure. The findings challenge the assumption that universal

standards necessarily enhance access, demonstrating instead that locally derived metadata significantly outperforms generic descriptors in retrieving *Melitensia*, Maltese cultural content. Additionally, since material from OAR@UM is available through Google, these LSH are providing representation for both the Maltese language and culture. Through the indexing of this material using the LSH the UM Library is contributing to the preservation of Maltese cultural material. As for librarians, such a tool helps them to not only be more efficient and precise in their work, but also more attune to their collections and the communities they serve. Beyond local retrieval, hybrid metadata models offer a testbed for rethinking controlled vocabularies at scale, particularly for underrepresented linguistic and cultural domains.

Second, the study frames the library–community relationship through Social Exchange Theory (SET). It argues that the facilitator model is sustained by a mechanism of reciprocity rather than altruism alone. Analysis of participant feedback and outreach outcomes reveals that community members contribute when the perceived rewards, such as identity validation, trust, and personalized support, outweigh the social and emotional costs of participation (Scicluna, 2025). When the library acts as a reliable friend, offering recognition, care, and responsiveness, contributors reciprocate with the gift of their heritage materials. Reliability is shown through the work being done in promoting this material. Rather than just collecting the material, cataloging it and leaving it on the shelf collecting dust. Accessibility becomes the key reward for contributors.

By synthesizing these technical and social findings, this paper proposes a replicable framework for academic libraries seeking to operationalize post-custodial practice. It argues that becoming a true facilitator requires a dual commitment: a willingness to cede descriptive authority through the adoption of community-derived metadata, and a sustained investment in relationship-building grounded in principles of social exchange. In the end, this study recommends that the value of academic collections increasingly depends on the library's ability to extend its impact through such partnerships, facilitating knowledge creation both within and beyond academia

2. Literature Review

This review examines the theoretical underpinnings of participatory archives, the intersection of community informatics and cultural memory, and the challenges inherent in adopting post-custodial frameworks within academic institutions.

2.1 Participatory Archives and Shared Custodianship

Participatory archive theory posits a redefinition of the relationship between archivists and the communities they serve. Central to this theory is the concept of shared custodianship, which challenges the exclusivity of institutional archival authority. Huvila (2008) highlights that participatory archiving involves significant emotional labor and necessitates protocols that ensure accountability and trust. This is particularly relevant when examining initiatives like the *KPF*. Scholars such as Roeschley (2024) argue that such participation fosters a sense of belonging and intergenerational exchange, allowing diverse voices to shape and narrate community heritage. This shift acknowledges that the preservation of local history is not merely a technical process but a social one, where the community's input is as vital as the archivist's expertise.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory in Community Archiving

To understand the motivations driving community participation in initiatives like the *KPF*, it is essential to employ SET. SET (Homans, 1958; Blau, 2017) conceptualizes participation as a cost–reward calculation, where individuals weigh effort, risk, and emotional investment against anticipated benefits. Within community archiving, these rewards may include recognition, access, and the preservation of cultural identity. In initiatives such as the *KPF*, participation is therefore not purely altruistic but reflects a negotiated exchange in which the institution provides infrastructure and visibility in return for community knowledge and materials. This perspective highlights the central role of trust and reciprocity, as participation declines when perceived costs outweigh benefits.

2.3 Community Informatics and the Digital "Living Archive"

Community informatics emphasizes the role of digital technologies in enabling local participation in heritage processes (Popple et al., 2020). Through digitization and open-access dissemination, ephemeral materials become more accessible, supporting broader engagement and knowledge sharing (Kurtz & Flesher, 2025; Lor, 2013). Platforms such as institutional repositories function as dynamic "living archives," where cultural memory is continuously shaped through interaction rather than preserved as static records (Sabharwal, 2019). This aligns with cultural memory theory, which frames remembrance as an evolving social process (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989), and highlights how participatory

initiatives facilitate ongoing negotiation of identity within digital environments (Ma et al., 2025).

2.4 The Post-Custodial Shift: Opportunities for Academic Libraries

The transition toward post-custodialism, where libraries act as facilitators of community heritage rather than mere custodians, presents significant opportunities for innovation. This evolving role reimagines the relationship between archivists and communities, engendering a more collaborative framework.

One significant opportunity is the fostering of deeper connections between libraries and communities to include diverse voices. The shift toward post-custodial models repositions academic libraries as facilitators of community heritage rather than sole custodians. This approach fosters collaboration, expands representation, and enables the inclusion of diverse voices in archival processes (Zavala et al., 2017; Adelson & Mickelson, 2022). It also encourages innovation in cataloging practices, particularly through critical approaches that prioritize cultural context and community knowledge over rigid standardization (Sklar et al., 2025).

2.5 Challenges in the Transition to Facilitation

Despite these opportunities, the shift to a community-centric, post-custodial model is fraught with challenges. Issues regarding the sustainability of participatory models and the balancing of institutional goals with community needs are critical considerations (Roeschley, 2024; Cushing, 2018). There exists an inherent tension between the academic library's custodial role and its facilitative role, underscoring the importance of establishing protocols that ensure trust in the collection process (Huvila, 2008). Resource constraints frequently impact the implementation of these practices. Many digitization initiatives face limitations in funding, technological support and human resources, which can restrict scope and lead to a selective representation of community heritage, risking the omission of underrepresented voices (Webb & Franks, 2019). Additionally, institutional barriers and professional hesitations persist.

While the literature celebrates the ethos of post-custodialism, it often glosses over the structural incompatibility between grassroots community archives and the rigid frameworks of academic institutions. A significant critique of current scholarship is that it frequently treats community engagement as a form of outreach or service, rather than a core archival function

(Cushing, 2018). Consequently, existing models often fail to address the sustainability paradox specific to academic libraries: projects are frequently driven by individual enthusiasts or short-term grants rather than embedded into the institution's collection development policy (Roeschley, 2024). The Town vs. Gown dynamic introduces a barrier that general community archive theories fail to account for. This concept describes the historically fraught and often antagonistic relationship between a university's community (gown) and the local inhabitants (town) of cities dominated by the institution. As noted by Kozak (2017), the neoliberal trend in university funding forces libraries to justify every asset in terms of curriculum support or research output. This creates a tension where hyper-local heritage, like the feast programmes, is often viewed as lacking sufficient academic rigor to warrant permanent institutional resources (Webb & Franks, 2019). Current post-custodial frameworks fail to offer a mechanism for reconciling this tension, leaving academic librarians without a roadmap to legitimize community co-curation within their specific bureaucratic hierarchies. The role of the university in this context is not uncontested. Large institutions engaging with community heritage risk reproducing extractive dynamics often critiqued in postcolonial discourse. In the Maltese context, however, alternative infrastructures such as local libraries or band club archives lack the technical capacity for large-scale digitization, long-term digital preservation, and global dissemination. The KPF model therefore positions the university not as an owner of heritage, but as an infrastructural partner. Importantly, the continued presence of materials within community networks, alongside scan-and-return practices, mitigates the risk of institutional appropriation while leveraging the university's resources to enhance visibility and access.

Finally, balancing power dynamics remains a complex challenge. Librarians must navigate shared authority and participatory governance while being mindful of the histories and sensitivities of the communities involved (Zavala et al., 2017). This necessitates a commitment to decolonizing archival spaces, ensuring that community narratives are not only preserved but positioned within their rightful contexts (Thin & May, 2024).

2.6 Towards a Sustainable Model of Co-Curation

A critical review of the literature reveals a significant gap between theoretical advocacy and operational praxis. While scholars like Huvila (2008) and Caswell et al. (2017) powerfully articulate why participatory archives are necessary for social justice, there is a scarcity of empirical models detailing how academic libraries can operationalize these concepts without relinquishing their standards of preservation and metadata control.

The current body of knowledge lacks a scalable workflow that addresses the specific trust deficit inherent to large academic institutions. Existing models assume a level of agility found in small community organizations, but they fail to account for the slow-moving, standardized nature of university infrastructure. This research bridges this divide. By analyzing the KPF, this study moves beyond the why to propose a concrete how, a Community-Academic Co-Curation Model that integrates the flexibility of social exchange with the stability of institutional archiving.

This paper argues that a structured approach is required to operationalize these theories. The KPF provides the empirical basis for such a framework. By synthesizing the principles of SET with the logistical realities of digital archiving, this research proposes a Community-Academic Co-Curation Model. This model standardizes the ad-hoc successes of community engagement, offering a roadmap that balances institutional rigor with community agency. It addresses the sustainability paradox noted by Roeschley (2024) by embedding community rewards directly into the archival workflow, ensuring that the exchange remains beneficial for both the University and the local contributors long-term.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitatively driven mixed-methods case study to examine the dynamics of community co-curation within an academic library context. As articulated by Yin (2018), case studies are particularly suited to investigating contemporary phenomena situated within real-life contexts, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred. This approach is appropriate for the present research, as the KPF initiative is intrinsically embedded within both the socio-cultural fabric of the Maltese festa tradition and the institutional framework of the UML.

The research follows a descriptive and exploratory orientation. It not only documents the operational processes underpinning the KPF initiative but also to analyse the social interactions it generates through the theoretical lenses of Participatory Archive Theory and SET. By concentrating on a single, in-depth case, the study aims to develop a scalable Community–Academic Co-Curation Model that may be transferable to other post-custodial archival and library contexts. Although the study is primarily qualitative in nature, it incorporates a limited mixed-methods component through the analysis of quantitative access

statistics from the OAR@UM repository, which are used to assess the impact of locally generated metadata on content discoverability.

3.2 Context of the Study: The *KPF*

The unit of analysis for this study is the *KPF*, a specialized digital collection hosted on the UML's institutional repository, OAR@UM. The collection comprises digitized local feast programmes, ephemeral booklets traditionally distributed during village feasts, dating from the early 20th century to the present. These items possess high cultural value for local communities but have historically fallen outside the scope of traditional academic collection development policies. Their value is seen from a holistic point of view. Even though the articles within are considered their best asset, when seen from a collection point of view, one can also start to appreciate other assets. These include; the evolution of the Maltese language, advertisements highlighting not only economics and consumerism of a particular period, but also the evolution of marketing and graphic design, the printing presses as a testament to Maltese industrial heritage and lastly a social anthropological view of how the village festa evolved (Zahra Camilleri, 2023). Their value increased from local to global in 2023, when the Maltese festa was inscribed in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2026). Thus, highlighting further the importance of preserving these publications.

There are many similar collections in private hands. Band clubs or other festa organisations also have their own archives, whereas local libraries might have some books pertaining mostly to their location. This leaves researchers with information spread around the Maltese archipelago and with very little information in knowing whether it is available to consult or not. The fact that having this collection organised and accessible not only through the analogue form but also digitally is advantageous for the researchers. Consequently, it introduced the University of Malta libraries to a whole new community.

While the University's involvement introduces clear benefits, such as infrastructure, technical expertise, and long-term digital stewardship, its role is not without tension. Large institutions engaging with community heritage risk reproducing extractive dynamics, particularly when compared to local entities such as band clubs or community libraries. In the Maltese context, however, these alternatives often lack the capacity for large-scale digitization, metadata standardization, and sustained digital preservation. The *KPF* therefore positions the University not as a custodian of ownership, but as an infrastructural partner. Through scan-and-return practices and continued community presence of materials, the initiative

mitigates institutional appropriation while amplifying visibility, access, and research potential beyond what could be achieved locally in isolation.

3.3 Data Collection and Operational Framework

Data for this study was derived from an analysis of the program's operational phases and the workflows established between the Library and community participants. The process was observed and documented across three distinct phases, which serve as the primary data points for analyzing the efficacy of the co-curation model.

Phase I: Outreach and Negotiation (The Exchange)

This phase involves the identification of potential donors and the negotiation of terms. Consistent with SET, this stage is characterized by the establishment of trust and reciprocity. Data gathered from this phase focuses on the 'terms of exchange'. Both parties incur gains/rewards and losses/costs in this exchange. The Library gains growth in this collection, both analogue and digital at the cost of the use of its platform, storage both physical and digital and time in terms of processing the donation. Whereas the donors relinquish their property to the library through their donation whilst at the same time gaining structured curation and enhanced access to their donation, alongside institutional support for its long-term digital management. This donation is acknowledged publicly through a post on social media, thus the donor also has the public acknowledgement as an additional reward.

Phase II: Participatory Digitization and Description

The core of the methodology lies in the co-curation workflow. Unlike traditional models where archivists work in isolation, this phase documents the collaborative processes:

- **Digitization:** The conversion of physical programmes into high-quality PDF/A formats.
- **Descriptive Metadata:** The consultation and utilization of community knowledge to populate metadata fields (e.g., identifying obscure saints, dialectal nuances, or specific events) that professional catalogers might lack.

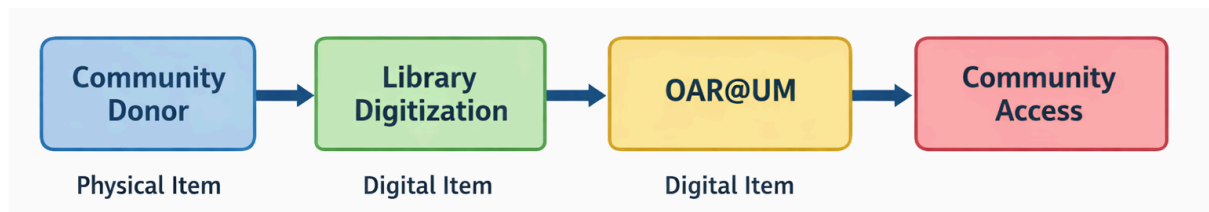


Fig 1: This visual representation illustrates the collaborative workflow where community members and library staff interact at the digitization and metadata stages.

The KPF does not operate as an open submission platform; rather, all digitized materials are processed and uploaded by library staff. Community members contribute content and contextual knowledge during in-person or mediated interactions, but metadata is subject to editorial review before publication. Locally derived subject headings (LSH) are incorporated alongside standardized vocabularies, with archivists responsible for resolving inconsistencies, normalizing variants, and linking terms to controlled identifiers where possible. While the system permits the coexistence of variant expressions to reflect vernacular usage, this is managed through a hybrid approach that balances flexibility with catalog integrity. This ensures that community contributions enhance, rather than destabilize, the discoverability framework.

Phase III: Dissemination and Access (OAR@UM)

The final phase involves the upload and open-access dissemination of the material. The analysis here focuses on the platform's role as a living archive (Sabharwal, 2019). Metrics regarding access, download rates, and subsequent community feedback serve as indicators of the program's impact and sustainability.

Early examples from this collection were ephemeral in nature and are more difficult to come across, since most were probably discarded. Having at least a digital copy of these programmes ensures that the information is preserved and accessible through the OAR@UM platform. It is important to note that digitization enhances access and reduces handling of fragile originals; however, it does not in itself constitute preservation. Long-term access depends on sustained digital curation, storage, and system maintenance.

3.4 Participant Sampling and Quantitative Metrics

To validate the proposed model, this study employed a mixed-methods data collection strategy focusing on the KPF. The data collection was designed to capture both the discoverability of content over time and the information-seeking behaviors of its users.

Quantitative data was derived from the observation of 48 articles uploaded to the UM's institutional repository - OAR@UM. To measure the impact of Cultural Warrant on discoverability, these articles were divided into two distinct sets: a control group cataloged exclusively with generic LCSH and a variable group enriched with specific LSH.

The analysis focused on repository access logs to evaluate engagement levels between these groups. This approach normalized the data against general repository traffic, ensuring that the observed spikes were attributable to the specific period and metadata strategy rather than overall platform growth.

Data was not collected at a single point in time; rather, interaction patterns (views and downloads) were monitored longitudinally over a total period of six months. To accurately track the discoverability trajectory, statistics were recorded at fixed time intervals following the upload date:

- Immediate/Short-term: 1 day, 1 week, 2 weeks, and 4 weeks.
- Medium/Long-term: 8 weeks, 12 weeks, 16 weeks, 20 weeks, and 24 weeks.

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured (standardised open-ended) interviews conducted via online platforms (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit 13 participants who actively utilized the KPF collection.

The sample was composed of key informants, primarily local historians and individuals with a vested interest in local history. The demographic profile of the participants was exclusively male, aged between 25 and 55, a distribution noted to reflect the current composition of the active festa community rather than intentional selection bias.

Consistent with a convergent mixed-methods design, the longitudinal quantitative metrics and the qualitative interview data were collected independently and integrated during the interpretation phase. This approach allowed the study to cross-validate the statistical impact of metadata against the actual research practices and search strategies of the community.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis synthesizes observations from these operational phases to identify key themes: *Trust Building*, *Shared Authority*, and *Sustainability*. These themes are mapped against the theoretical framework of SET to understand the motivations of participants. The successful workflows identified in this case study are then distilled to construct the proposed Community-Academic Co-Curation Model, which is presented in the subsequent Discussion section.

4. Findings and Results

The analysis of the *KPF* yields significant findings regarding the efficacy of community co-curation. Data derived from the project's operational timeline, social media metrics, and participant feedback reveals three primary outcomes: the success of organic networking strategies, the validation of the social exchange mechanism through digital feedback loops, and the tensions between physical and digital access.

4.1 The Technical Shift: Cultural Warrant and Discoverability

A distinct finding of this study is the tangible impact of Cultural Warrant, the authority of the community to name its own heritage. Analysis of OAR@UM access statistics reveals a contrast between items cataloged strictly with LCSH and those enriched with LSH.

Statistical data shows a steady increase in article views over 24 weeks, with local subject headings slightly outperforming general ones by 2.46 views on average. This suggests that LSH may enhance discoverability.

The LSH effect was particularly noticeable in the retrieval rates of items tagged with hyper-local vernacular terms. Items enriched with locally relevant terms and personalities or feast terminologies such as those relating to the Good Friday processions, provided by community experts, demonstrated significantly higher engagement compared to those relying solely on standardized descriptors. This impact was most pronounced during event-driven periods; a case in point was the the passing of a prominent local artist during the data collection period. This external trigger generated an immediate surge in information-seeking behaviour due to it being reported on social media platforms and the news. Crucially, the presence of localized metadata allowed users, who were searching using the artist's local nickname or specific band club affiliations, to successfully retrieve

relevant commemorative material, validating the hypothesis that LSH provides critical access points during real-time community events.

The quantitative evidence suggests that moving away from strict custodial practices toward using community-generated metadata has not resulted in immediate negative consequences for catalog usability. Rather, it unlocks the collection's utility, proving that local relevance is the primary driver of access for ephemeral heritage.

4.2 Productizing Heritage: Active Outreach and Branding of KPF as a Community Product

Interviews with library stakeholders reveal a deliberate shift from traditional passive collection to active marketing, treating the KPF not merely as an archive but as a distinct product or service with its own brand identity. Respondents indicated that the decision to create specific logos and adopt a 'notice board approach' for social media posts was strategic, designed to lower the cognitive cost of engagement for non-academic users.

A defining feature of the KPF's success was its rejection of a library-centric outreach model in favor of hyper-local targeting. Even though this collection is available for students and academics to consult, another target audience was the *festa* community and more broadly the general public. Therefore, it made sense for the KPF team to tap into local residents' and *festa* groups as most probably they wouldn't have necessarily followed the UM's social media channels. One of the reasons could be that they perceived the UM as distant and unrelatable. Actively meeting persons in their home towns and even band club houses - *kazini* - allowed people to connect directly to the collection through the librarians. Stakeholders noted that entering these existing, non-institutional spaces was crucial for dismantling the Town vs. Gown divide.

By presenting the KPF on community turf, and further amplifying this presence through local radio shows dedicated to research and history, the library demonstrated a willingness to engage on the community's terms, thereby establishing the initial rapport necessary for a post-custodial partnership. Mass media proved to be an excellent way to reach out to the general public. These experiences were rewarding in terms of exposure for the KPF collection and library services and for the librarians themselves. However, they came at an initial cost of preparedness and time. It was eventually decided that having a member act as PR for the collection would ultimately be of benefit and more efficient in terms of outreach.

Complementing this physical presence was the digital Notice Board strategy, which served to lower the cognitive cost of engagement. Community feedback highlighted that general posts regarding current activities acted as low-barrier entry points, appearing in users' feeds alongside everyday community news rather than as formal academic requests. This approach, implemented since the Facebook group's inception in 2020, validates the SET principle that minimizing the transaction cost of access, in this case, the effort required to find information or understand the request, significantly increases the likelihood of participation. The resulting organic growth, driven largely by word-of-mouth, suggests that informal, consistent visibility is more effective than sporadic, formal calls for papers. A drawback of such a strategy is that frequent posting would dilute the message as it becomes lost or people become desensitised to such content as they develop doom scrolling habits.

This visibility was further amplified by the intervention of key community figures who functioned as 'cultural influencers.' Local history experts and prominent band club members utilized their own established digital channels to advocate for the KPF, frequently tagging the collection in relevant posts or sharing specific findings with their followers. This endorsement from trusted community voices provided a critical layer of social validation; by leveraging their personal networks, these influencers effectively transferred their credibility to the academic initiative, granting the library recognition in spaces it could not organically reach on its own.

The initiative provided a tangible reward to the community through the One-Stop-Shop effect. Participants frequently expressed value in having these publications together in one location both physically and digitally. Prior to the KPF, feast programmes were scattered across private homes, storage, local libraries and individual band club archives, making comprehensive research nearly impossible. By centralizing these ephemeral items physically and digitally on OAR@UM, the library satisfied a latent community need for a consolidated, accessible resource. Online usage statistics indicate that this centralized hub is being actively utilized by both academic researchers and local enthusiasts, proving that the library's intervention added utility that the community could not achieve in isolation.

This grassroots networking strategy allowed the library to bypass traditional institutional gatekeepers and reach holders of local heritage. The timeline of the project reveals that the notice board approach and engagement with residents' groups generated a momentum that formal acquisition policies often fail to ignite. By embedding itself within the existing social fabric of the village, both digitally and physically, the KPF successfully transformed the archive from a static repository into a living, community-driven resource. This productization

strategy may be transferable to other collections; however, it risks overextension where institutional identity becomes fragmented or resource-intensive to sustain.

4.3 Validation of Social Exchange: Trust, Reciprocity, Rivalry, Transparency, and Access

The findings indicate that community participation is driven by specific social rewards, validating the application of SET in the proposed model. Interviews with community members and key informants highlighted three distinct mechanisms of this exchange:

The role of key informants proved pivotal in overcoming initial skepticism. The cultivation of relationships with 'local experts' and UM academics created necessary bridges between the institution and the community. These individuals effectively vouched for the Library's intent, transforming abstract institutional goals into trusted local initiatives. A notable instance involved a member of a village band club, who was also an active participant in the user group, sharing a very positive post about the KPF project on his wall. This public endorsement from a peer within the community acted as a catalyst, validating the project to others who might have otherwise remained hesitant to engage with a university entity.

This peer validation frequently triggered a phenomenon of competitive social capital, or the 'Rivalry Effect.' Informants noted that posts from specific band club members often elicited a response from opposing factions, who subsequently contacted the KPF team to ensure their own history was equally represented. Rather than purely adversarial competition, this behavior functioned as a self-correcting mechanism for the collection's completeness, where the desire for balanced representation drove rival groups to voluntarily contribute archival material. In the context of SET, the archive transformed into a stage for asserting social status; the reward for participation extended to inclusion and representation in this collection and consequently the public elevation of one's group identity over a rival's.

To sustain this engagement, the Library implemented a strategy of closing the feedback loop through 'Thank you posts' with each donation received and highly popular 'behind-the-scenes' content. These visual glimpses into the curation process, showcasing how items are shelved, handled, and preserved, served to demystify the institution. Crucially, they allowed the online community, many of whom had never visited the physical collection, to visualize the tangible care invested in their heritage.

This transparency was further formalized through posts highlighting milestones, such as reaching 4k members, and the *Rendikont*, an end-of-year statistical report posted on social

media. By publicly accounting for the collection's growth and usage, the Library provided a public acknowledgement and affirmation for the community's labor, demonstrating transparency and respect for their contributions. This practice reinforced the *reward* side of the social exchange equation, fostering a sense of shared ownership. Consequently, evidence shows a marked shift toward active participation, where members have moved from being passive consumers of digitized content to active narrators, independently posting themselves of events they are involved in and directly curating the living history of their community. In order to have a more curated approach, the posts are first reviewed by the administrators of the KPF group page. If the content is related to activities and events regarding feasts together with posts related to Maltese culture and history they are approved. Posts directly related for-profit businesses or related to politics are not accepted in the group.

This independent curation now encompasses a broad spectrum of heritage content, ranging from specific feast updates to announcements regarding cultural events and public talks. To further structure this engagement, the platform utilizes seasonal 'Photo Threads' during high-intensity periods such as Good Friday and Christmas. In these spaces, members are actively encouraged to contribute their own visual documentation, uploading photographs of local sepulchral monuments or snapshots from feasts they personally attended. In the case of Good Friday or Christmas, the photos are posted in the comments section and require no approval from the administrators. This is purposely done to have a more immediate effect when posting and allowing the administrators of the group to better manage their time. That being said, all the photographs uploaded are monitored and acknowledged. Should the photo comments not agree with the original posts, the administrators of the group reserve the right to delete them - so far this has never been done. Members of the group enjoy these posts as they are an easy and quick way for them to contribute and sometimes showcase their own or their community's work. This mechanism transforms individual experiences into a collective digital archive, validating the members' role as primary recorders of the event. Compared to traditional acquisition workflows, this model reallocates staff time from processing to engagement, increasing front-loaded labor while potentially reducing acquisition friction.

4.4 Navigating Access: The Digital vs. Physical Tension

The findings highlight a sharp dichotomy between the exponential success of the digital platform and the persistent constraints of the physical library. Feedback consistently identified the physical library's limited opening hours as a significant barrier to visit in person. For the working-class demographic that comprises the bulk of the festa community, the cost of physical access, defined by rigid institutional schedules, was often too high to justify the effort. The digitization of the KPF effectively removed this barrier, allowing members to engage asynchronously, posting themselves and tagging events they were involved in from their own devices. This shift from physical restriction to digital fluidity maximized the reward of access, evidenced by statistics showing that KPF material is now being actively used and shared by the community itself, entirely independent of library intervention.

However, a distinct Physical Disconnect remains. While the digital KPF is thriving, this engagement has not necessarily translated into increased footfall for the physical archives. Stakeholders noted a struggle in "getting more people to use the physical collection," suggesting that for many community members, the digital surrogate has effectively become the primary archive. Despite this, the findings point to the potential for broader ecosystem growth, particularly regarding "supporting material at JCL Melitensia." This highlights a currently underutilized opportunity to establish cross-institutional linkages, using the unified digital narrative of the KPF to guide digital users toward related, non-digitized physical holdings, thereby reintegrating the physical library into the community's information landscape.

5. Discussion

The findings from the *KPF* initiative validate the shift towards a post-custodial paradigm, demonstrating that academic libraries can successfully serve as social infrastructures rather than mere repositories. By analyzing the data through the lens of SET and Participatory Archive Theory, this study identifies the mechanisms required to sustain such partnerships.

The strength and success of the KPF project's transition towards a post-custodial paradigm is due to the already present and active festa community. Whereas other digitisation projects can adapt such a paradigm this is dependent on their target audience. Seeing that the KPF already has an already established community, it felt natural to tap into it and lean into post-custodial actions. That being said, KPF served as the facilitator for researchers to tap

into and access other resources (including other more traditional digitisation projects) being offered by UM Library on OAR@UM.

5.1 From Transaction to Relationship: Operationalizing Social Exchange

The success of the KPF heavily relied on transforming the archival process from a transactional handover into a relational exchange. The findings indicate that the "opening hours issue" and the intimidation of the physical library were significant barriers. By moving the initial engagement to local residents' groups and utilizing word-of-mouth through key informants, the Library effectively lowered the cost of participation, a core tenet of SET (Blau, 2017).

This aligns with Huvila's (2008) assertion that participatory archiving involves emotional labor. The KPF data suggests that the labor is not just on the archivist but on the community members who must trust an institution with their personal heritage. The positive post from a band club member served as a pivotal trust signal, validating the library's intent more effectively than any official policy could. This reinforces the argument by Adelson & Mickelson (2022) that libraries must step beyond traditional boundaries to engage communities on their own terms.

5.2 The Silent User and the Multiplier Effect

A critical observation regarding the dissemination strategy is the multiplier effect of community-led sharing. While the library initiated posts, the actual reach was amplified by group administrators and members who reshared content to their own personal networks.

Interestingly, a discrepancy emerged between visible social media engagement and actual repository usage. Posts often garnered modest reaction counts (likes/comments). However, cross-referencing these posts with OAR@UM analytics revealed a different reality: the same quiet posts generated significant click-through rates and downloads. This phenomenon aligns with the "90-9-1 rule" of participation inequality (Nielsen, 2006), which posits that the vast majority of online community members are lurkers or passive consumers.

This finding is vital for academic librarians, as it cautions against using vanity metrics, such as likes or follower counts, as the sole proxy for impact (Young & Rossmann, 2015). The data indicates that a substantial silent user base was consuming the content without

performing public performative actions, indicating that true engagement was occurring within the repository's access logs rather than the social media feed.

5.3 The Living Archive: Branding and Feedback Loops

The findings regarding the branding of KPF as a product and the use of the *Rendikont* (end-of-year report) offer a solution to the sustainability challenge highlighted by Roeschley (2024). Roeschley warns that participatory initiatives often fade once initial enthusiasm wanes. However, the KPF countered this by establishing a cyclical feedback loop.

The *Rendikont* acts as a recurring reward in the social exchange, publicly acknowledging the community's contribution and reinforcing their new status as co-curators. This turns the archive into what Sabharwal (2019) describes as a living archive, dynamic and interactive. The data showing organic growth and participants posting themselves suggests that when the archive is branded as a community asset (rather than a university asset), the community contributes to sustaining the initiative through its own networks, suggesting potential to support continued collection growth through their own networks.

5.3.1. Sustaining the Living Thesaurus: Managing Metadata Drift

Acknowledging the fluidity of vernacular language, this model frames the living thesaurus of LSH as an iterative process rather than a static authority file. Metadata drift, where community terms evolve or lose relevance over time, is anticipated not as a failure of cataloging, but as a reflection of the archive's living nature.

To mitigate the risk of obsolescence, the library employs a snapshot and review strategy. Just as the *festā* evolves, so too does the descriptive language. The repository maintains the original LSH terms as historical data points (preserving the language of the time), while the co-curation workflow periodically updates the terms depending on the material being catalogued. This ensures that new dialectal nuances are captured without erasing previous iterations. Furthermore, by linking LSH terms to stable, standardized LCSH identifiers in the backend, the library ensures that while the entry point for the community remains fluid and recognizable, the structural integrity of the catalogue is preserved for future academic retrieval.

It is important to clarify that the KPF does not function as an open submission platform. All materials are digitized and uploaded by library staff, with community contributions occurring through mediated interactions such as scanning events or consultations. Metadata contributions from participants are subject to editorial review prior to publication, with archivists responsible for resolving inconsistencies and maintaining catalog coherence. This ensures that while the system remains participatory, it retains professional oversight and long-term structural stability.

5.4 Bridging the Gap: The Community-Academic Co-Curation Model

Based on the synthesis of these findings and the gaps identified in the literature regarding a lack of practical frameworks, this paper proposes the Community-Academic Co-Curation Model. This model outlines a cyclical workflow for academic libraries to implement post-custodial initiatives sustainably.

The model is defined by three iterative phases:

Phase 1: Relational Outreach (The Trust Layer)

- **Activity:** Engaging with local experts and leveraging non-institutional spaces (Facebook groups, band clubs).
- **Theoretical Basis:** Addressing the trust deficit (Huvila, 2008) by utilizing community gatekeepers and cultural influencers.
- **Key Mechanic:** Branding the initiative as a shared product.

Phase 2: Participatory Co-Production (The Action Layer)

- **Activity:** Digitization and critical cataloging where community members provide context (dialect, nicknames, festa terminology).
- **Theoretical Basis:** Distributed authority (Roeschley, 2024) and Critical Cataloging (Sklar et al., 2025).
- **Key Mechanic:** Example: The Scan-and-Return policy to respect ownership. (However, most festa programmes were donated to the JCL and thus a physical library is also set up.)

Phase 3: Cyclical Dissemination (The Feedback Layer)

- **Activity:** Open Access via OAR@UM and the *Rendikont* report.
- **Theoretical Basis:** The Living Archive (Sabharwal, 2019) and Democratization of Knowledge (Poppo et al., 2020).
- **Key Mechanic:** Contributing to what can be understood as a feedback loop that may encourage further contributions (Reciprocity/SET).

Community-Academic Co-Curation Model

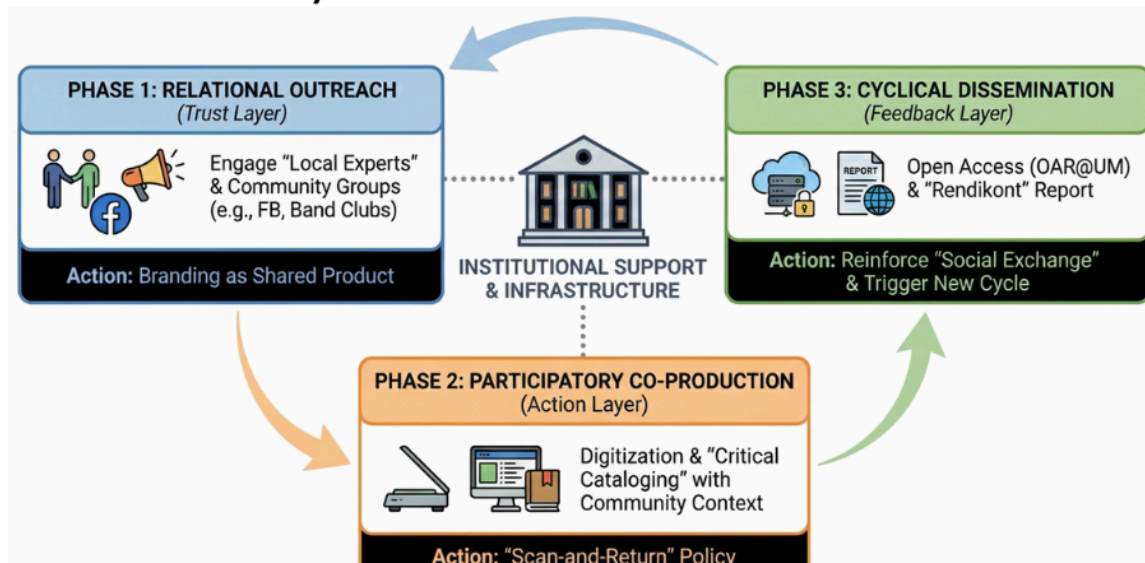


Fig 2: The Community-Academic Co-Curation Model. This diagram illustrates the proposed cyclical framework comprising three phases: Relational Outreach (Trust Layer), Participatory Co-Production (Action Layer), and Cyclical Dissemination (Feedback Layer), designed to sustain post-custodial partnerships.

5.4.1 Interdependency: The Cost of Omission

The explanatory power of the Community-Academic Co-Curation Model lies in its interdependency; the phases are not merely sequential steps but mutually reinforcing layers of the social exchange. If any single layer is absent, the proposed hypothetical model may lead to failure modes observed in traditional archival attempts:

- **The Hollow Archive (Absent Phase 1/Trust):** Without the initial *Relational Outreach*, even well-funded digitization projects fail to acquire material. If the Trust Layer is missing, the community perceives the library's request as extractive, an institutional demand rather than a partnership, resulting in high resistance and low participation.
- **The Black Box (Absent Phase 2/Co-Production):** If the library establishes trust but skips *Participatory Co-Production* (e.g., digitizing internally without community

metadata), the collection loses its Cultural Warrant. The result is a sterile, technically perfect archive that is undiscoverable to the community because it lacks the vernacular entry points (LSH) that drive engagement.

- **The Dead End (Absent Phase 3/Feedback):** This is the most common failure in academic initiatives. If *Cyclical Dissemination* is neglected, where the library takes the history but fails to 'return' the *Rendikont* or usage metrics, the Social Exchange loop is broken. As a result the community would perceive the cost of participation as having no recurring reward, leading to a rapid drop-off in future contributions and the eventual stagnation of the collection.

5.4.2. Beyond the *Festa*: Global Applicability of the Co-Curation Model

While this study is situated within the specific socio-cultural context of the Maltese festa, the structural challenges it addresses, the Town vs. Gown divide and the distrust of institutional motives, are widely observed across many academic library contexts. The Community-Academic Co-Curation Model proposed here is not contingent on the content of the collection but on the mechanism of the relationship.

For instance, an academic library in the United States seeking to archive local protest ephemera or underground music zines faces the same trust deficit observed in the festa community. In both contexts, the community possesses high-value cultural capital but perceives the institution as rigid or extractive. The solution applied here, using SET to lower transaction costs (e.g., via social media notice boards) and identifying Champions to validate the library's intent, is a transferable workflow. Whether the material is a village feast booklet in Malta or a tenant rights flyer in London, the core principle remains constant: participation is a reciprocal calculation. Libraries globally can replicate this model by identifying their own local currencies of exchange (e.g., digitization services, space for community meetings) to incentivize the sharing of hidden heritage.

5.5 Defining the Boundaries of Participation

A critical operational insight from this study is the necessity of defining clear curatorial boundaries within a participatory framework. The success of the Facilitator model paradoxically introduced the risk of scope creep; as trust in the *KPF* initiative grew, the library witnessed a spillover effect in community contributions.

Informants and community members, validated by the library's interest in their feast programmes, began offering relevant publications and physical artifacts outside the project's

scope, ranging from cassette tape collections and vinyl records to textile items like flags/banners and t-shirts. While this served as a strong qualitative indicator of restored institutional trust, it forced the *KPF* team to exercise strict curatorial discipline. Even though *Melitensia* publications, considered as auxiliary/additional material to the KPF collection, were accepted, the decision to decline artefacts, while politically delicate, was crucial for maintaining the project's feasibility. Even though these kinds of donations are politely declined, this occasionally requires careful negotiation to avoid perceptions of rejection. Members of the KPF team draw upon their relationship with their community members and should the need arise, they might direct the donation towards other collectors or institutions who might be interested. In this way, the donor would still have the reward of passing on his items towards a worthy receiver. It highlights that co-curation does not imply accepting *everything*; rather, it requires a transparent negotiation where the library must clearly communicate its resource constraints (digital-only infrastructure) without alienating the community members who offered the items.

5.6 Tensions in Standardization and Authority

While the model promotes engagement, the findings also highlight the tension between standardization vs. local nuance. The community's desire for narrative-heavy descriptions challenges the Library's Dublin Core standards. This mirrors the findings of Cushing (2018), who notes the difficulty of balancing institutional goals with community needs. However, the KPF case suggests that this tension is productive. By allowing local experts to input on metadata creation, the Library enriches the *Melitensia* collection with epistemic nuances that standard cataloging would miss, effectively decolonizing the description process as advocated by Thin & May (2024).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the evolving role of the academic library in a post-custodial landscape, using the *KPF* at the UM as a primary case study. The research highlights that the transition from custodian to facilitator is not merely a logistical shift in collection management, but a fundamental reimagining of the library's social contract with its community. The KPF initiative suggests that the "post-custodial" library is not one that abandons custody, but one that reimagines it as a shared responsibility. The virtual nature of the collection, existing on OAR@UM while the physical items remain in the community, resolves the custodial conflict, creating a space where the University provides the

infrastructure for sustained digital access and management, and the Community provides the *vitality* of context.

6.1 Summary of Contributions

The findings affirm that community co-curation is a viable mechanism for revitalizing cultural memory, provided that the "social exchange" between institution and citizen is carefully managed. The findings from the *KPF* initiative suggest that success is closely linked to lowering both physical and bureaucratic barriers. By addressing the opening hours issue via digital access and replacing formal acquisition with flexible scan-and-return policies, the library successfully facilitated the digitization and aggregation of local ephemeral heritage. This mobilization is reflected not only in acquisition but in sustained interaction, including repeat contributions and continued engagement with the digital collection.

This transition from abstract institution to welcoming space was further solidified through personal hospitality. Donors who visited the library to hand over their *festa* books were invited for personal tours of the collection, allowing them to physically see where their contributions would be housed and preserved. This tangible demonstration of care proved pivotal; many first-time contributors became return donors, subsequently bringing in additional ephemera/publications to further enrich the research potential of the archive. Ultimately, these interactions confirm that while digital tools facilitate access, it is the human investment, the handshake, the tour, and the acknowledgment, that supports initial trust-building within the participatory lifecycle.

Crucially, the library's commitment to reciprocity extends beyond digital access to the physical management of the collection itself. While primarily digital in its acquisition model, the initiative maintains a limited physical handling layer for redistribution purposes. Donors are informed at the point of acquisition/donation/contact that duplicate materials may be redistributed to support broader access and preservation across the heritage ecosystem. Where appropriate, contributors are given the option to retain their materials instead of donating them. In instances where donations result in duplicate copies, the *KPF* team actively contributes to what can be understood as a feedback loop by redistributing this surplus material back into the community ecosystem. Rather than discarding duplicates or hoarding them for exchange leverage, the library distributes them free of charge to other private collectors or national entities, such as Malta Libraries.

Duplicates kept/left at the library are placed in a reserved area with open shelves and organised the same way as the *KPF* collection - mainly by locality, organisation and year of

publications. Collectors and researchers are welcome to browse through them and take as many as they wish for personal use. At first, a maximum of three copies were being kept to be redistributed, however due to the ever growing KPF collection which resulted in spatial issues, the number of additional copies kept was reduced to one. Any additional copies were stored to be either distributed to other institutions such as homes for Senior Citizens or else hospitals. Other than that, the copies are distributed on a first come, first served basis which may result in some disappointments to collectors. That being said, the KPF team always tries its best to help out collectors with their needs.

It has been noted that in the past couple of years, the number of copies distributed has decreased. This could be because of the increase in the cost of their production, and consequently a lesser number of copies is produced. This does not affect the KPF project, rather it affects the number of duplicates received, making them more sought after for collectors.

This practice of altruistic redistribution fundamentally redefines the academic library's status; it is no longer a passive repository (a terminus for heritage) but a dynamic distribution hub. By strengthening the collections of peer institutions and private enthusiasts alike, the library reinforces the trust network, suggesting that its primary mandate extends to supporting the preservation of the festa narrative, regardless of where the physical object ultimately resides.

This research bridges the gap between the theoretical ideals of participatory archives (Huvila, 2008; Roeschley, 2024) and practical implementation. By synthesizing the operational successes identified in the case study, such as the branding of the collection as a community product and the use of the *Rendikont* to close the feedback loop, this paper proposes the Community-Academic Co-Curation Model. This framework offers other institutions a scalable roadmap for engagement, shifting the focus from the *extraction* of community data to the *facilitation* of community narratives.

6.2 Implications for Academic Libraries

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific context of Maltese feast programmes. The success of the *KPF* suggests that the future of the academic library lies in its ability to function as a social infrastructure (Adelson & Mickelson, 2022). The data showing organic growth through local residents' groups and word-of-mouth indicates that trust is the most valuable currency in contemporary archiving. Libraries that fail to engage with these informal networks risk becoming irrelevant to the living history of their communities. Furthermore, the tension identified between standardized metadata and local

narrative nuance challenges the profession to embrace critical cataloging (Sklar et al., 2025) as a standard practice, prioritizing community context over rigid institutional consistency.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on a single case study within a highly specific socio-cultural context. The six-month observation period limits the ability to assess long-term sustainability, particularly in relation to sustained engagement, metadata evolution, and infrastructure costs. The intense emotional attachment to the Maltese festa provided a powerful intrinsic motivation for participation that may not exist in other domains. Future research should therefore prioritize comparative studies in non-festa or non-heritage contexts, such as citizen science initiatives or archives of contemporary social movements, to test if the Community-Academic Co-Curation Model remains effective when the material lacks deep traditional roots.

Additionally, the reliance on dynamic LSH opens a critical avenue for technical research regarding longitudinal metadata drift. As community vernacular evolves, the terms used to describe these items today may become obsolete or contested by future generations. Long-term studies are needed to track how community descriptors shift over time and to develop adaptive archival systems that can accommodate this linguistic fluidity without losing historical discoverability.

While the initiative demonstrated strong engagement, the resource intensity of staff time, digitization workflows, and ongoing metadata management remains significant. Future research should evaluate the cost-benefit balance of such initiatives by comparing engagement levels, collection growth, and user interaction against traditional digitization workflows to determine long-term institutional viability.

6.4 Democratizing the Institutional Repository

Finally, the KPF initiative successfully bridged the Town and Gown divide, transforming the Institutional Repository (OAR@UM) from an exclusive academic silo into a public utility. Because *festa* programmes are multidisciplinary by nature, containing articles on art, sociology, theology, and local history, they appeal to a demographic far broader than the typical festa enthusiast.

By digitizing this diverse content, the library attracted a non-traditional user base to the university platform, including citizens who had previously never accessed an academic repository. In doing so, the project proved that ephemeral heritage acts as a gateway; it draws the general public into the academic sphere, validating that the University Library is not just for students, but a custodian of the nation's collective memory.

The KPF serves as a powerful testament to the potential of shared stewardship. It illustrates that when academic libraries open their digital doors to the community, they do not lose authority; they gain relevance. By embracing a model of co-curation that values the emotional labor of contributors as much as the technical expertise of archivists, libraries can transform themselves into dynamic living archives (Sabharwal, 2019), spaces where the past is not just stored, but actively kept alive for the future.

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