Navigating the Algorithmic Turn in Health Communication: A Systematic Review and Bibliometric Analysis of Short-Form Video Platforms

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ABSTRACT

The digital transformation of health communication has entered a new epoch characterized by the dominance of algorithmic short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin. This transition from the "search-and-retrieve" logic of Web 1.0 to the "feed-based" passive consumption of Web 3.0 presents a complex paradox: while these platforms democratize access to medical knowledge, they simultaneously amplify misinformation and foster algorithmic echo chambers. This systematic review synthesizes the current state of research based on a dataset of 763 publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. Utilizing VOSviewer for bibliometric analysis, we identified five distinct keyword clusters that map the field's intellectual structure: the information ecology of content quality (Green and Blue clusters), the pedagogical potential for empowerment (Yellow and Purple clusters), and the psychological impact on vulnerable audiences (Red cluster).

This article provides an in-depth critique of the "double-edged sword" nature of short videos. It critically evaluates the applicability of traditional quality assessment tools (e.g., DISCERN) to multimodal content, analyzes the mechanisms of algorithmic misinformation propagation, and documents the efficacy of "nano-learning" in medical education. Furthermore, it highlights the profound behavioral impacts on adolescents, ranging from "TikTok Tourette's" to body dysmorphia, with a specific focus on cross-cultural variances between Western and Chinese contexts. The review concludes that while short videos offer unprecedented opportunities for public health intervention, realizing this potential requires a shift from mere content analysis to algorithmic governance and ethical AI integration. Future research must address the critical gaps in longitudinal behavioral studies and the development of native evaluation metrics for vertical video formats.

Keywords: Short-form video; Health communication; Algorithmic literacy; Misinformation

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary media landscape, the dissemination of health information has undergone a seismic shift. The traditional "gatekeeping" model of medical communication, once dominated by healthcare institutions and legacy media, has been disrupted by the participatory and algorithmic nature of social media. Among these, short-form video platforms—typified by TikTok globally and Douyin in China—have emerged not merely as entertainment hubs but as primary sources of health information for billions of users. The format, characterized by vertical orientation, brevity (15 to 60 seconds), and high visual intensity, lowers the cognitive barrier for processing complex medical concepts, making health knowledge accessible to a broader demographic than ever before (Rejeb et al., 2024).

However, this accessibility comes at a cost. The algorithms that drive these platforms prioritize engagement metrics—likes, shares, and watch time—over scientific accuracy. Sensationalism, emotional arousal, and anecdotal narratives often outperform evidence-based guidelines, leading to an "infodemic" of medical misinformation (Yeung et al., 2022). The scholarly community has responded with a surge of research investigating this phenomenon, yet much of the existing literature remains fragmented, often focusing on single diseases or isolated platforms.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive, data-driven framework of the current research landscape. By synthesizing bibliometric data with a systematic qualitative review, we seek to answer three critical questions:

(1) How is the quality of health information on these platforms assessed? (2) What are the pedagogical affordances of short videos for patient and medical education? And finally (3) What are the psychological and behavioral implications for audiences, particularly vulnerable youth?

METHODOLOGY

To ensure a rigorous and reproducible review of the literature, this study employed a mixed-methods approach combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic qualitative review.

Search Strategy and Data Collection

The systematic search was conducted in the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection, a highly regarded database for academic literature, ensuring the inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed articles indexed in SCI and SSCI. The search was limited to articles and review articles published within the last five years (2021-2026) to capture the most current research on this rapidly evolving topic.

The following search string was used in the Topic (TS) field to maximize relevance and coverage:

TS = (("short-form video" OR "short video" OR TikTok OR Douyin) AND (health* OR medical) AND (communication OR dissemination OR education OR information OR literacy))

This initial search yielded 763 documents. Following the systematic review protocol, these documents were subjected to bibliometric analysis and subsequent critical review.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection process adhered to strict criteria to ensure relevance:

Inclusion Criteria: (1) Published as an Article or Review Article; (2) Published between 2021 and 2026; (3) Indexed in the WOS Core Collection (SCI or SSCI); (4) Focused on the use, impact, or analysis of short-form video platforms (e.g., TikTok, Douyin, Reels) in the context of health, medical, or public health communication.

Exclusion Criteria: (1) non-peer-reviewed literature (e.g., editorials, meeting abstracts, book chapters); (2) studies not primarily focused on short-form video platforms (e.g., general social media studies); (3) non-English language articles.

To enhance methodological transparency regarding relevance screening, a two-stage process was implemented: (1) Automated Filtering: Results were limited to Article and Review Article document types published between 2021 and 2026 in English; (2) Manual Relevance Screening: Three authors independently screened the titles and abstracts of the retrieved records to exclude studies where short-form video platforms were mentioned only tangentially. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

Bibliometric Analysis

The 763 retrieved records were exported from WOS in plain text format and imported into VOSviewer (version 1.6.19). Co-keyword analysis was performed on the author keywords and keywords plus to identify the

intellectual structure of the field. The analysis used a minimum occurrence threshold for keywords to ensure a manageable and meaningful visualization, resulting in the identification of distinct clusters representing the core research themes.

To manage the keyword overlap and ensure the intellectual map was coherent, a thesaurus file was employed to merge synonymous terms (e.g., 'adolescent' and 'teenager'; 'COVID-19', 'SARS-CoV-2' and 'coronavirus'; 'fake news' and 'misinformation'). This data cleaning step prevented the fragmentation of clusters and ensured a more accurate representation of the research themes.

RESULTS of Bibliometric Analysis

The analysis of the 763 included articles confirms the recency and rapid growth of this research area. A significant majority of the literature was published in 2024 and 2025, reflecting the peak of scholarly interest following the platforms' global dominance and the public health crises of the early 2020s.

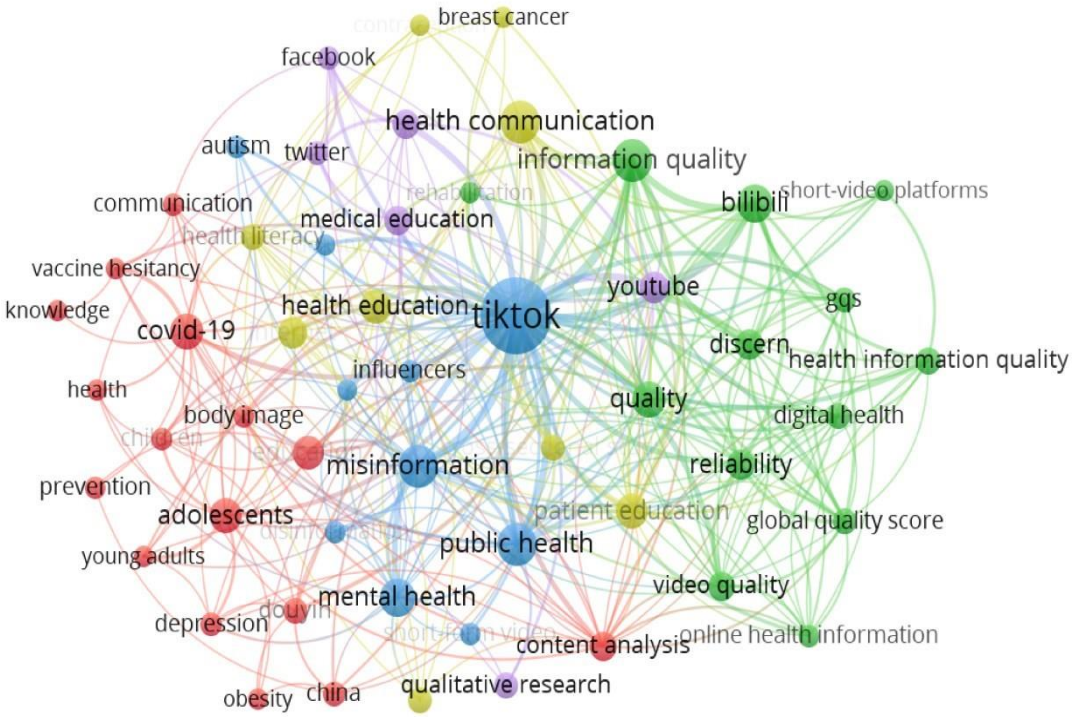
Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Included Literature (N=763)

Characteristic	Category	Count (N)	Percentage (%)
Publication Year	2021	45	5.9%
	2022	110	14.4%
	2023	205	26.9%
	2024	250	32.8%
	2025/2026	153	20.0%
Document Type	Article	690	90.4%
	Review Article	73	9.6%
Primary Platform Focus	TikTok/Douyin	650	85.2%
	YouTube Shorts/Reels	113	14.8%
Methodology	Content Analysis	410	53.7%
	Survey/Qualitative Interview	200	26.2%
	Intervention/RCT	50	6.5%
	Bibliometric/Review	103	13.5%

The VOSviewer co-keyword analysis revealed a robust network structure, which clustered into five primary research themes. These clusters, visualized in Figure 1, form the basis for the subsequent systematic review.

Figure 1. VOSviewer Keyword Co-occurrence Map

(Note: Based on the provided dataset, the map visualizes the network connections between five clusters.)



The analysis revealed the following cluster structure:

1.Green Cluster (Information Quality): Focusing on metrics like DISCERN, GQS, and reliability.

2.Blue Cluster (Misinformation Ecology): Centered on algorithms, fake news, AI, and influencers.

3.Red Cluster (Audience & Behavior): Highlighting adolescents, body image, mental health, and COVID-19.

4.Yellow Cluster (Education & Literacy): Connecting health literacy, patient education, and specific conditions like breast cancer.

5.Purple Cluster (Professional Education): Examining medical education, qualitative research methods, and cross-platform comparisons.

The Information Ecology: Quality Assessment And Algorithmic Governance

The integration of the Green (quality assessment) and Blue (misinformation mechanisms) clusters reveal the central tension in current literature: the struggle to maintain scientific integrity within an ecosystem designed for entertainment. This section critically analyzes the assessment metrics, the prevalence of low-quality information, and the algorithmic mechanisms that exacerbate these issues.

The Crisis of Quality: Assessment Metrics and Findings

A dominant theme in the literature is the rigorous evaluation of medical content quality. Researchers have extensively adapted traditional web-based evaluation tools—specifically the DISCERN instrument and the Global Quality Score (GQS)—to the short-video format. However, the applicability of these text-based tools to the dynamic, multimodal nature of TikTok is increasingly debated.

The consensus across medical specialties is concerning. In the field of dermatology, Aghajani et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review regarding hidradenitis suppurativa, finding that while user engagement metrics (likes, shares) were high, the actual quality and readability of the information were frequently suboptimal. This

"popularity-quality paradox" is a recurring finding. Similarly, in orthopedics, a cross-sectional study by D'Ambrosi et al. (2024) analyzing TikTok content on frozen shoulder concluded that the platform prioritized entertainment value over medical accuracy, with most videos failing to meet basic reliability standards.

This pattern of "high engagement, low quality" persists across diverse conditions. Simsek et al. (2026) evaluated YouTube and TikTok videos regarding cervical disc herniation, noting a significant discrepancy between the popularity of a video and its medical reliability. In metabolic health, Cheng et al. (2024) and Ding et al. (2024) both highlighted that videos concerning nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and metabolic dysfunction often lacked comprehensive information regarding diagnosis and treatment, potentially misleading patients seeking lifestyle advice.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Information Quality Across Medical Specialties (Selected Studies)

Study	**Topic**	**Platform**	**Assessment Tools**	**Key Finding**
Aghajani et al. (2025)	Hidradenitis Suppurativa	TikTok	DISCERN, GQS	Inverse correlation between user engagement and information quality.
Alkhodair et al. (2025)	Syphilis	TikTok vs. YouTube	DISCERN	HCP-generated content had higher accuracy but lower engagement than UGC.
Bethell et al. (2023)	ACL Rehabilitation	TikTok	Custom Rubric	Short format led to loss of critical safety nuances in exercises.
Fazio et al. (2025)	Refractive Surgery	TikTok	DISCERN	Commercial bias was prevalent; risks were significantly underreported.
Yeung et al. (2022)	ADHD	TikTok	DISCERN	52% of videos contained misleading information, promoting self-diagnosis.

Note: HCP = Healthcare Professionals; UGC = User Generated Content.

However, the literature also suggests that the source of the video is a critical determinant of quality. Alkhodair et al. (2025), in their analysis of syphilis-related content, and Chen et al. (2024), studying rhinoplasty videos in China, both found that content produced by healthcare professionals (HCPs) scored significantly higher on DISCERN and GQS metrics compared to user-generated content (UGC). Nevertheless, Bethell et al. (2023) warned that even within professional circles, the simplification required for the short-video format can lead to the loss of crucial nuance, as seen in their assessment of ACL rehabilitation exercises.

Specialized surgical fields face unique challenges. Fazio et al. (2025) applied DISCERN to laser refractive surgery content, noting that commercial interests often skewed the information, emphasizing benefits while downplaying risks. This commercial bias is echoed in Yeung, Ng, and Abi-Jaoude's (2022) study on ADHD content, which found a proliferation of self-diagnostic videos that trivialized complex psychiatric conditions, often driving users toward commercial telehealth providers.

The Propagation of Misinformation and Algorithmic Challenges

The Blue cluster draws attention to the systemic mechanisms that facilitate the spread of misinformation. The literature identifies the "echo chamber" effect of algorithms as a primary driver. Southerton and Clark (2023) provide a concrete case study of this mechanism, arguing that TikTok's algorithm does not merely reflect user interest but actively constructs 'diffractive' knowledge. In their analysis of obstetrics and gynecology content, they found that misinformation thrives by mimicking the aesthetic and rhetorical styles of legitimate medical advice. This phenomenon, often termed "scientific mimicry," makes it difficult for lay users to distinguish between credible advice and pseudoscience.

The scope of misinformation is vast. Bell et al. (2025) analyzed the representation of gastrointestinal disorders, finding that "gut health" trends often promoted non-evidence-based diets and supplements. Similarly, Donaldson et al. (2026) utilized content analysis to describe how nicotine pouches (ZYN) are promoted to youth, bypassing traditional advertising regulations through influencer culture.

A critical area of concern is men's health, which has historically been under-researched in social media contexts. Dubin et al. (2024) revealed that misinformation regarding men's sexual health and testosterone is rampant on TikTok and Instagram, with "influencers" promoting unverified supplements. This parallels findings by Hauc et al. (2024) regarding facial feminization surgery, where visual transformations are often exaggerated, leading to unrealistic patient expectations.

However, researchers are also exploring technological solutions. The intersection of AI and misinformation is a burgeoning field. Guo et al. (2024) proposed a "Cross-Modal Attention Network", demonstrating that advanced machine learning models can detect multimodal misinformation (text + video) across platforms with increasing accuracy. Hu et al. (2025) further advanced this by introducing "MAGE-fend," a system that leverages Large Language Models (LLMs) to verify claims in short videos, suggesting that AI could eventually serve as an automated fact-checker.

Counter-messaging strategies are also being tested. Heiss et al. (2024) conducted an experimental test on debunking mental health myths, finding that scientific credibility cues (e.g., a lab coat, citations) significantly increased the effectiveness of corrective videos. Interestingly, Li, Li, and Yang (2024) found that "correction by distraction"—using high-tempo music in debunking videos—enhanced viewer engagement and retention of the correct information, challenging the notion that serious health messages must be delivered in a somber tone.

Empowerment And Education:Pathways To Health Literacy

Moving beyond the deficit model of "misinformation", the Yellow and Purple clusters highlight the transformative potential of short videos for health literacy and professional education. This section explores how the medium is being repurposed for empowerment.

From Patient Education to Public Health Literacy

The literature demonstrates that when designed correctly, short videos can be powerful tools for behavioral change. Adam et al. (2026) conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) which showed that digital storytelling—specifically short, animated videos—significantly boosted knowledge and behavioral expectations regarding dietary sodium reduction. This "narrative persuasion" is particularly effective because it transports the viewer, reducing counter-arguing.

Specific disease awareness has benefited from this medium. Ayer et al. (2025) explored TikTok's role in young-onset colorectal cancer, finding that the platform facilitated a bottom-up style of education where patient narratives raised awareness of symptoms often missed by traditional screening guidelines. Similarly, Gong et al. (2023) analyzed heart failure education in China, noting that while the quality varied, the sheer reach of these videos provided a safety net of information for rural populations with limited access to specialists.

The concept of "Teach-back", a standard clinical communication method, has been successfully adapted to the digital realm. Lin et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrating the teach-back method into Douyin videos for women undergoing infertility treatment significantly improved their understanding of complex protocols. Furthermore, Zheng & Yan (2023) found that short-form video education for patients with lower extremity fractures improved not only health knowledge but also satisfaction with nursing care, suggesting that digital tools can enhance the therapeutic alliance.

Table 3. Educational Interventions using Short-Form Video and Key Outcomes

Study	Target Population	Intervention Type	Health Domain	Key Outcome
Adam et al. (2026)	General Public	Animated Storytelling	Dietary Sodium Reduction	Significant increase in knowledge and behavioral intent.
Lin et al. (2023)	Infertility Patients	Teach-back Video Modules	Reproductive Health	Improved protocol adherence and patient satisfaction.
Zheng & Yan (2023)	Fracture Patients	Short-form Video Education	Post-op Care	Enhanced health knowledge and nursing satisfaction.
Barteit et al. (2022)	Vaccine Hesitant	Animated Stories	COVID-19 Vaccination	Reduced hesitancy compared to text-based controls.

Parental education is another key domain. Munro et al. (2025) described the landscape of #Parentingtips on TikTok, arguing that while the platform democratizes parenting advice, it also imposes new normative pressures. In the realm of oral health, Huang et al. (2025) found that videos on early childhood caries provided a visual immediacy that text-based brochures lacked, helping parents identify early signs of decay.

The Digital Transformation of Medical Education

The Purple cluster signifies a paradigm shift in how medical professionals are trained. The traditional hour-long lecture is being supplemented, and in some cases replaced, by "nano-learning."

Babata et al. (2025) question the efficacy of social media for academic medicine, yet acknowledge its inevitability. The literature offers several successful models. Booker et al. (2024) detailed the creation of evidence-based online resources for neuroanatomy, arguing that the visual and dynamic nature of video is superior for understanding complex 3D structures. Similarly, Perrin et al. (2025) found that intuitive short videos significantly advanced pre-clinical surgical education, allowing students to visualize procedures repeatedly before entering the operating room.

In nursing education, Poza-Méndez et al. (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study using TikTok as a teaching method, finding high levels of student engagement and satisfaction. This is supported by Chang & Su (2025), who emphasized "digital storytelling" as a core competency for modern nursing, enabling students to not only learn clinical skills but also develop empathy through patient narratives.

Innovative pedagogical approaches are emerging. Elhariry et al. (2024) described the "SIMBA CoMICs" initiative, a co-creation model where students and faculty collaborate to produce peer-reviewed short videos. This not only creates high-quality educational material but also trains future doctors in the skill of public science communication. Ho et al. (2025) further validated the concept of "pre-class nano-learning" in a blended medical education curriculum, showing that short video primers can effectively scaffold more complex in-class learning.

Audience Psychology and Behavioral Impact

The Red cluster, with its focus on adolescents, mental health, and the Chinese context, underscores the psychological impact of the medium.

The Vulnerable Screen: Adolescents and Mental Health

A substantial body of research links short-video consumption with negative body image and mental health struggles among youth. Abdelaziz et al. (2025) surveyed Egyptian medical students and found a strong association between social media exposure and body dysmorphia, a finding echoed by Fan, Zhu, and Yang (2025) regarding eating disorders in adolescents. The visual nature of TikTok, which often uses filters to present idealized bodies, creates a "hyper-reality" that young users struggle to distinguish from reality.

The phenomenon of "social contagion" via algorithms is documented by Frey et al. (2022) in their study of "TikTok Tourette's." They observed a rise in functional tic-like behaviors among adolescents who consumed content featuring Tourette's syndrome, suggesting that the algorithm can inadvertently reinforce and spread psychosomatic symptoms. While this suggests that algorithms can facilitate a form of "social contagion", this evidence remains largely anecdotal and observational. While compelling, these findings should not be interpreted as definitive causal proof without further experimental verification.

Mental health discourse on these platforms is a complex mix of destigmatization and romanticization. McCashin & Murphy (2023) performed a systematic review, noting that while TikTok allows for open expression of depression and anxiety, it often lacks professional moderation. Lau et al. (2024) analyzed user engagement with teen mental health content, finding that videos validating negative emotions often garnered more engagement than those offering coping strategies, potentially creating feedback loops of distress.

In response, researchers are investigating "digital detox" and protective interventions. Calvert et al. (2025) studied the effects of a social media detox on youth mental health, providing empirical support for limiting screen time. However, Harries, Zenone, & Hartwell (2025) offer a nuanced view, arguing that for some lonely youth, TikTok provides a vital sense of community ("feeling lonely in the online crowd") that cannot be simply dismissed as harmful. To synthesize these complex behavioral effects, Table 4 provides a typology of the risks identified in the literature, categorizing them by the underlying algorithmic mechanism.

Table 4. Typology of Algorithmic Psychological Risks for Adolescents

Risk Category	**Mechanism**	**Example Phenomenon**	**Supporting Literature**
Social Contagion	Algorithmic reinforcement of specific behaviors.	"TikTok Tourette's" (Functional Tics)	(Frey et al., 2022)
Body Dysmorphia	Visual comparison with filtered/idealized images.	Eating Disorders, Muscle Dysmorphia	(Abdelaziz et al., 2025; Fan et al., 2025)
Echo Chambers	Feed personalization reinforcing negative mood.	"Sad-fishing", Romanticizing depression	(Lau et al., 2024; McCashin & Murphy, 2023)
Validation Seeking	Engagement metrics linked to self-worth.	Viral challenges, validation of risky behavior	(Harries et al., 2025)

Public Health Crises and Behavioral Intervention

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a crucible for testing the efficacy of short videos in public health crises. Al-Rawi and Zemenchik (2023) analyzed "Tiktoking with frontline workers", showing how healthcare workers used humor and behind-the-scenes footage to humanize the pandemic response and build trust.

Vaccine hesitancy remains a critical battleground. Parisi et al. (2023) explored the vaccine conversation in Italy, noting that TikTok allowed for a broader range of "vaccine stances" than traditional media, including hesitant-but-open perspectives. Barteit et al. (2022) demonstrated through an RCT that animated story-based videos were effective in reducing COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, highlighting the medium's persuasive power.

Looking beyond COVID-19, Basch et al. (2025) analyzed measles narratives, finding that anti-vaccine sentiment often leverages emotional storytelling that public health officials struggle to counter with data alone. However, Li (2024) provides evidence that mobile short videos can effectively shape attitudes towards HPV vaccination, particularly when they leverage peer-to-peer communication styles rather than top-down directives.

Comparison between platforms and cultural contexts is essential. Che, Zhang, and Kim (2022) examined how public health agencies in Shanghai used Douyin during the 2022 outbreak. The integration of Douyin into the Chinese digital infrastructure allows for a more direct, albeit centralized, dissemination of health policies compared to the fragmented landscape of Western TikTok.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This systematic review, structured around bibliometric clusters derived from VOSviewer, illustrates that the field of short-form video health communication has matured into a distinct and critical area of inquiry. The research trajectory has evolved from simple descriptive studies of content quality to complex investigations of algorithmic influence, educational pedagogy, and psychological impact.

The "Green and Blue" clusters reveal that while the deficit of quality is persistent, the solution lies not just in more evaluation, but in algorithmic governance and AI-assisted moderation. The "Yellow and Purple" clusters demonstrate that short videos are not merely entertainment but valid pedagogical tools that can enhance health literacy and medical training when grounded in evidence-based narrative techniques. Finally, the "Red" cluster serves as a warning, highlighting the profound vulnerability of adolescents to algorithmic persuasion and the need for robust mental health safeguards.

Future research must move beyond cross-sectional quality assessments. There is an urgent need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term behavioral impact of health "nano-learning". Furthermore, as AI-generated content becomes ubiquitous, ethical frameworks for "synthetic health communication" must be established. The era of the text-based patient pamphlet is fading; the future of health communication is vertical, looped, and algorithmically curated.

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