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# Montblanc's Entrepreneurship from Pens to Watches and Social Contribution through the Act of "Writing"

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the branding of Montblanc, which is interesting in terms of brand, through its entrepreneurial spirit and social contribution. Specifically, we will focus on Montblanc's entrepreneurial spirit, from writing instruments to watches and social contribution projects through the art of "writing." Montblanc's involvement in branding emphasizes the four major brand components (management resources) of history, place, people, and technology. We have provided spirited discussions on the four components and our perspectives.

**Keywords:** Montblanc; Entrepreneurship; Social contribution; Luxury brand; Watch business

**Introduction**

In general, in order to build strong brands such as luxury brands we should focus on the innovative products with inimitability (product innovation) and the innovative brands managing both heritage and innovation, and both timelessness and modernity (brand innovation) and will conduct interdisciplinary research as follows:

1. How to design a prospective product with identity of the brand (design management of new products)
2. How to design aesthetic form of product and to create *kansei* (subjective and hedonic) value which cannot be measured quantitatively but qualitatively (design management in narrow sense)
3. How to design strong identity of the corporation or the brand (design management in broader sense, and brand management)
4. How to innovate not only the form of the product as an output but also designed value and design process (design innovation management)

5. How to innovate brand through creating the innovative products, communicating the essence of difference from others, and leading the market (brand innovation management)

**Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to analyses the branding of Montblanc, which is interesting in terms of brand, through its entrepreneurial spirit and social contribution.

Specifically, we will focus on Montblanc's entrepreneurial spirit, from writing instruments to watches, and social contribution projects through the act of "writing."

As an analysis method, analyses from the perspective of brand elements peculiar to luxury brands.

**Literature Review**

Luxury brands are widely known to be related to unique attributes such as hedonism, exclusivity, and prestige (e.g. Kapferer [1]; Vigneron and Johnson [2,3]; Dubois, et al. [4]; Wiedmann, et al. [5]; Kim and Johnson [6]; Nagasawa [7]). Based on these attributes,

the literature suggests the existence of a 'dream value' of luxury (Dubois and Peternault [8]; Katahira [9]; Nagasawa [10]). Therefore, when general consumers acquire and use luxury products as a form of dream fulfilment, they are assumed to raise their subjective level of happiness, or their subjective well-being, to a greater or lesser extent (Diener [11]; Lee [12]).

For example, Kumagai and Nagasawa [13] discussed the effect of hedonic shopping value on a consumer's subjective well-being based on the branded product and its variation according to brand luxury. In addition, the influence of shopping channels on consumers' experiential shopping values is assessed in this study. Using customer surveys for data collection and applying ANOVA and moderated regression analysis, the data imply that physical mono-brand stores contribute to hedonic shopping value, thereby increasing subjective well-being based on the acquired product, especially when the purchased product's luxury value is high. These results suggest that luxury managers should continue to place a high level of importance on their physical direct retail presence.

## Methods

As a method of analysis, we analyze from the perspective of brand components peculiar to luxury brands.

- Name
- Logo (logo mark and logo type)
- Character
- Slogan (catch copy)
- Jingle (sound, music)
- Packaging (packaging, containers)

It is said that a brand can differentiate itself from other products and services by designing each element to communicate a consistent brand image.

Luxury brands still require names, logos, and packaging. In addition, we should note that De Beers' slogan, 'A Diamond is Forever', is one of the most successful slogans in the history of marketing in the 20th century. However, because luxury brands are rarely advertised in TV commercials, jingles like commercial songs do not seem effective, and characters such as Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) may be counterproductive.

However, based on my original and extensive research, our research has concluded that the following factors, which are overlooked in daily necessities (FMCG) and commodities, but are critical for luxury brands [14].

- History (not simply a particular year, but historical events and celebrities);
- Locality (start-up sites, main factory's location; regional and village-based rather than country-based);

- Heroes (those who have achieved great things for the brand; respect and endorsement of the message, passion, and dedication of founders, engineers, and designers);
- Technologies (patents, know-how, and designs)

This study explains branding through sublimating and leveraging history, the place, people, and technology as brand components (management resources) using Montblanc, a German brand under Richemont, as an example.

## Montblanc: A German Brand that is Simple, Sturdy, Sophisticated, Offering Items from Fountain Pens to Authentic Watches that Last a Lifetime

Montblanc, a Richemont Group-affiliated writing instrument brand, is known as a sophisticated, high-quality writing instrument manufacturer. Alfred Nehemias, a banker from Hamburg, and August Eberstein, an engineer from Berlin, founded the company 'Simplo Filler Pen GmbH' upon returning from the US in 1906 in Hamburg, where they began manufacturing and selling fountain pens. The name Montblanc was registered as a trademark in 1909, and White Star was adopted in 1913. 'Meisterstück' was launched in 1925, and the company's name changed to 'Montblanc Simplo GmbH' in 1934.

Alfred Dunhill became the majority shareholder in 1977, and Montblanc became a subsidiary; in 1985, Dunhill bought Montblanc. Montblanc was acquired by the Richemont Group in 1993 and thus became a Richemont subsidiary. The head office and fountain pen workshop are in the suburbs of Hamburg, and the flagship boutique located in Neuer Wall, which is the most prime location in Hamburg and is lined with luxury brand stores.

They entered the watch market in 1997, and for the first decade or so, their watches made consumers feel scared and surprised by a sense of incongruity, as in 'why do Montblanc of fountain pens make watches?'. As a result, they operated 'cautiously'. However, in the decade of the 2010s, their watch brand has established a strong presence. Montblanc is a rare example and is interesting from a branding perspective as other well-known writing instrument manufacturers, such as the U.S. Parker, German Pelikan, and Japanese Pilot, Sailor, and Platinum Pen, do not produce watches.

Montblanc's *manufacture* are located in Le Locle and Villeret in Switzerland. Montblanc Manufacture is also the headquarters of Montre Montblanc S.A., which is based in Le Locle. The Manufacture is located on the semi-underground floor of the castle-like building. It is not visible from the front entrance, giving the impression that the site is a secret base.

The *manufacture* in Villeret is the former Minerva building and site. Minerva was a long-established brand widely known for mechanical chronograph (watches with a stopwatch function). It was a brand capable of producing internally developed chronograph movements at a time when most other companies

called *établissage* relied on *ébauche* (general-purpose movements made by manufacturers specialized in movements). It was bought by the Richemont Group in 2006, became a subsidiary of the Richemont Group, and merged with Montblanc's watch division. In addition, it is currently developing the 'Montblanc 1858 Collection' as an 'Inspiration from Minerva.' Minerva was founded in the year 1858. Montblanc has also been developing leather products since 1926.

On the other hand, Montblanc is also known to contribute to social contribution projects through "writing," which is its original business. For example, Montblanc signed a partnership agreement with UNICEF, and it has contributed to several programs with the shared goal of maintaining primary education and literacy programs for children around the world.

## Results and Discussion

### To strengthen and emphasize history: if the history is lacking, compile and build it through discovery and acquisitions

If we say that companies that do not have a long history have nothing to do with history, we are mistaken. If the history is disrupted or the company does not have one, there are other ways to supplement it. When acquiring a company, you should better choose a company that has a long history. It is not appropriate to call it 'fabricating' history; instead, it can be called 'compiling' history. It is unnecessary to emphasize that the company has been acquired. However, emphasizing that you have inherited the company's history and 'merged' companies is not a lie and will give the impression that you have a long history. Though opinions on this vary depending on whom you ask, 'compilation of history' provides consumers with peace of mind and confidence, therefore, it should be promoted rather than regarded as 'fabrication' or 'exaggeration.' The advantage of acquisition for the acquiring companies is that it allows them to 'acquire resources that they do not own,' and we should not forget that resources include history.

We will now examine the case of Montblanc, which began as a writing instrument brand but is now also known for its watches. Although Montblanc, a writing instrument brand under the Richemont umbrella, was founded in 1906, it is a new entrant in the world of watches. The company entered the watch business relatively recently in 1997. However, in a highly competitive luxury watches market, where the standard is to appeal to consumers with the company's long history and the high-level technologies it has accumulated over the years at the core of its value, having a short history is disadvantageous. Therefore, Montblanc is capitalizing on Minerva's history, which it recently acquired. Its utilization method had also changed from the 2000s, when they had only recently entered the watch market, to the 2010s, since when the watch business had grown dramatically.

When Richemont completed its acquisition of Minerva in 2007,

it reorganized the company into *Institut Minerva de Recherche en Haute Horlogerie* and launched four new products, 'Collection Villeret 1858,' equipped with Minerva movements under the Montblanc brand. Villeret is Minerva's founding location and the current location of Montblanc's plant. The main feature is a chronograph equipped with MB M13-21, also known as Calibre 13-21. Montblanc has used this movement in a variety of models since then.

Minerva, which had been dormant, has returned to the center stage after being entrusted to Montblanc, which has grown to produce 20,000 units per year. However, the price was considerably higher than during the Minerva era. Montblanc attempted to use Minerva's history to develop legitimacy for the Minerva movement. It established itself as an icon or a 'standard' and an inheritor of the spirit of Minerva, which was too expensive to sell after Richemont acquired Minerva, which then joined the network of manufactures shortly after its entry into the watch business in the 2000s. In other words, Montblanc had rewritten its founding year from 1997, when Montblanc started the watch business, and even from 1906, when it was founded, to 1858, when Minerva was founded. At the same time, Montblanc, a fountain pen manufacturer that also makes watches, can be said to have used Minerva to establish legitimacy.

Furthermore, Montblanc's strategy shifted dramatically in 2011. The 'Collection Villeret 1858' reverted from avant-garde to a classic design that alluded to Minerva of the past. Among other things, the Vintage Pulsograph has become a timepiece for watch enthusiasts, with its magnificent black enamel dial and extremely elaborate finish befitting its icon status. Jérôme Rambert (now Richemont CEO), who took over as CEO for Montblanc from Jaeger-LeCoultre CEO in 2013, appreciated Minerva for preserving classical watchmaking as their 'treasure,' and attempted to launch Minerva watches as a collection rather than an icon. It was a return to the direction Minerva had previously sought.

Montblanc integrated its over-diversified product lines into four categories in 2019: 'Heritage,' '1858,' 'Time Walker,' and 'Star Legacy.' The top-of-the-line products in the first two categories were incorporated under the Minerva movement to maintain the classical style. The idea here is not to separate Minerva but to extend the existing line. 'Montblanc Heritage Pulsograph Limited Edition 100' was a new product born of this philosophy. As with the previous model, which was equipped with the outstanding MB M13-21 finish, the SS was adopted for the case, and the price range was lowered to around 3 million yen. Additionally, the design was simplified to remind the user of Minerva's chronographs from the 1940s and 1950s, even if one does not notice the logo [15]. In other words, during the decade of the 2010s, when Montblanc's watch business grew exponentially, the Minerva brand could be said to have been leveraged [16].

Montblanc, famous for the fountain pen, emphasizes its legitimacy by bringing Minerva's watch technology and history

to the forefront, eradicating any sense of incongruity. This is an excellent example of a new business being elevated to a long-established level by emphasizing its legitimacy. It would be no wonder if people began to believe that 'Montblanc was founded in 1858 and has been producing watches since its inception.' In the world, especially in Japan, we can discover many hidden companies that are both old and technologically advanced, even if they cannot survive on their own. I would like to use this as an example when considering mergers, acquisitions, and business partners.

### **To extend history: social contribution as an opportunity to meet potential customers**

History can be extended to access potential customers by leveraging the value created by culture and by linking it to social contribution. Continuing to make social contributions in areas that are intrinsically related to the brand's history can also serve to connect with potential customers. Montblanc has identified new customer segments by linking the characteristics of its core products, which are rooted in its own history, with social contribution.

To honor and support contemporary art patrons who have devoted time and funds to the advancement of art and culture, the company established *La Fondation Montblanc de la Culture* in 1992 to bestow the *Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award*, the only international award of its kind given to contemporary art patrons. In and of itself, it is standard commercial support for art. However, the company is also conducting a social contribution project centered on the act of 'writing.' In 2004, the company launched its first joint project with its long-standing partner UNICEF, '(Sign up for) The Right to Write campaigns,' to promote high-quality education to children worldwide. In 2009, the company raised \$4.3 million for the Meisterstück 'Signature for Good' program to address global illiteracy. In 2013, it supported UNICEF's educational programs and succeeded in soliciting large donations.

It also launched the 'Power of Words' Project in collaboration with The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and Tribeca Film Institute that year. A short film featuring the words of former South African president Nelson Mandela was produced and screened until late at night in Times Square, New York's symbol, attracting attention. It expanded its 'Power of Words' project in 2014 [17]. Thus, the continued engagement of 'Montblanc, an original fountain pen brand' with social contribution, is likely to result in the strengthening and improvement of the brand's image through the linkage between the brand and the product, as the engagement is highly related to the pursuit of 'words' and 'writing,' which represents the company's core and history. While the method adopted by major hamburger chains to imprint brand names and images on children from an early age to create a base that adults will love may not be suitable for luxury brands, it can be pursued through this form of social contribution. This example demonstrates the benefits of finding fields that are easily understood and highly

relevant to consumers and making a social contribution there.

Some companies often make contributions to society through prominent fields, such as sports, regardless of their primary business. Montblanc, on the other hand, has recently expanded its watch business, but the brand's original business is fountain pens, and the social contribution centered on 'words' and 'writing' are more effective in expanding the brand's history.

### **To recognize the existence and content of the locality: to express founding aspirations of the place through brand names and logos**

Montblanc is the name of a mountain. Alfred Nehemias, a banker from Hamburg, August Eberstein, an engineer from Berlin, and Klauss-Johannes Voss, a stationary trader from Hamburg founded 'Simplo Filler Pen GmbH' in 1906 in Hamburg, a company where they began manufacturing and selling fountain pens. At the time of its founding, Montblanc was not the company's name, but as ink leakage was a common problem with fountain pens at the time, it was adopted as the brand name: 'Let's aim for the best quality. What is the highest mountain in Europe? Montblanc.' Montblanc is located on the border between France and Italy. As a French word, it may seem strange as the name of the German brand, but it became the brand name for this reason.

The Montblanc logo, dubbed the 'White Star,' is a rounded, six-cornered star. It was adopted in 1913 and has since become synonymous with Montblanc. This logo represents the snow-capped Montblanc, the highest peak in Europe. Additionally, '4810,' which represents the altitude of Montblanc, is used to denote Montblanc's elevation. In Japan, the term 'Fuji (mountain)' may be used. Indeed, there are numerous companies called 'Fuji XX.' Fuji Bank, one of the predecessors of Mizuho Bank, had a logo featuring Mt. Fuji. I do not know whether 'mizuho' or its original meaning of 'fresh ears of rice' has been used in its logo since it joined Mizuho Bank.

If the place is not directly linked to the founder's aspiration, it is difficult for both consumers and employees to understand the value and, therefore, something must be devised. As demonstrated by Montblanc, incorporating the founder's aspiration into the brand name and logo increases recognition by providing an opportunity to explain the name/logo and making it easier to symbolize the value. Thus, the method of incorporating the founder's aspiration and the place's essential characteristics (values) into a brand name is particularly advantageous for manufacturers. There are numerous instances in Japan where a place's characteristics (value) are used for naming brands.

Although it is not a company, Togoshi Ginza is the name of a well-known shopping district in Shinagawa Ward, Tokyo. Not only did the name originate with the transfer of bricks from Ginza, Japan's largest commercial district, but also with the desire to attract the hustle and bustle of Ginza; thus, the names Togoshi and Ginza were combined as Togoshi Ginza [18](Togoshi-ginza Shopping Street,



n.d.). This is probably an easy-to-understand example of encoding aspirations by associating a common shopping district with the popular image of 'Ginza' as a place 'that is luxurious and bustling.' If this had been the 'Togoshi Prosperous Shopping District,' it would have been clear, but the idea might not have been conveyed adequately, resulting in low recall value.

### **To strengthen and emphasize the locality: to disperse the place (production sites) into optimal locations and to increase value**

The case of Montblanc is one in which an improvement in brand value was achieved by conducting 'optimization of the production site,' a method used to choose the optimal production site for each product without insisting on the place of founding. Lutz Bethge, who served as the CEO of Montblanc from 2004 to 2013, explains that Montblanc is an international brand that produces writing instruments in Germany, watches in Switzerland (two locations), jewelry in France, and leather products in Italy. It is not an exaggeration to say that each country's specialty is in a different field.

One can emphasize the brand DNA by concentrating production to the brand's headquarters or birthplace (in the case of Montblanc, Germany), but Montblanc is unique in that it does not adopt this method, instead of attempting to enhance quality by dispersing production bases to the country that is best at producing that product. Even though bases and businesses are dispersed, there is no doubt that the brand is run with a sense of unity as a team, as there are occasions Hamburg craftsmen and jewelry designers collaborate or share know-how.

The author who visited the company's Hamburg headquarters to conduct an interview noticed that the goals were clearly defined, the team was united and shared a passion for manufacturing even though the process was divided according to the role. The engineers created an impressive family atmosphere. Some fountain pen engineers have been with the company for over 35 years. We argue below that one of the key factors underlying the company's success is its facilities, organizational structure, and know-how in producing the highest quality products with precision manufacturing, the passion for manufacturing generated by that mechanism, and its production volume, which has been kept to the bare minimum required by the number of orders [19]. Jérôme Rambert, who was appointed CEO in 2013 (and served until 2017), explains that Montblanc is a lifestyle brand that now sells not only instruments but also watches and accessories. However, the author who felt that the watch business was not at the level of a side business of a writing instrument brand was surprised that it felt like a separate, stand-alone company.

Watches, fragrances, and leather products accounted for nearly 60% of sales in the fiscal year 2013, and the annual report stated that 'Fountain pens are no longer a core business.' When business areas

expand in this manner, the brand philosophy may not penetrate the organization well, and problems such as a decline in quality may arise. Rambert has achieved numerous results, including the optimization of production locations, on the basis that his mission is 'to maximize the potential of the brand and to manage it to improve productivity and quality with the best teamwork' and 'to provide inspiration from experiences that customers have never had before (using existing things such as watches and writing instruments).' The significance of his achievement is evident in the fact that Richemont Group reinstated the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which had been abolished in March 2017, and that Rambert was promoted from Chief Operating Officer (COO) to Group's CEO based on recognition of his achievements at Jaeger-LeCoultre before Montblanc and at Montblanc [19,20]. This is an example of how 'strengthening the place,' or selecting an optimal production site based on the product field can be an effective means, albeit a problematic tactic.

Whereas the production sites mentioned above can be compared to pilgrimages that are visited occasionally, the stores are more like temples that are visited regularly. It is not an exaggeration to say that having a temple (store) in a prime location attracts many devout worshippers has the same meaning as expressing one's position in the industry. Customers who would visit downtown districts gather in downtown districts, and customers who would come to seek first-class products in prime locations, who would wear first-class products, and understand value gather in prime locations.

### **Strengthen and emphasize the person: use the legendary watchmaker as an appealing material**

Creating a brand story or history is not a fake nor a lie, but a creation. Even if you are not the founder or technician of a watch company, there is a way to appeal to the pioneers of the watch industry. For example, a leading German company called Montblanc is famous for its fountain pens, but Montblanc now also makes watches, leather goods, and perfumes. In terms of money, fountain pens cost 50,000 yen and 100,000 yen at the highest, but watches start at 500,000 yen and 600,000 yen, so in terms of sales, fountain pens are no longer a core business for Montblanc, according to the annual report.

Montblanc began its watch business in 1997. However, although luxury needs history, Montblanc has no history of watchmaking. That is why Montblanc prepared the Nicolas Rieussec collection. Nicolas Rieussec is a watchmaker who is said to have invented the chronograph, in short, the stopwatch, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The disk rotates, ink is dropped on it at the measurement start point and plotted again at the end of timekeeping measurement. Nicolas Rieussec invented a mechanism to measure the elapsed time by the length of the arc in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Do you drip ink? You see, the principle of the fountain pen, Montblanc. That is

why Montblanc created this Nicolas Rieussec collection, Montblanc says:

Montblanc Nicolas Rieussec chronograph uses a minute dial, an iconic bridge to support the disc, a rotating disc, and a stationary hand to measure a short time when placed off-center. A chronograph (chronos = time, graphein = writing in Greek) was invented by watchmaker Nicolas Rieussec, who attaches a container of ink to a fixed pointer and marks a rotating enamel disc to record time. Inspired by), Montblanc, deeply rooted in “writing,” pays homage to him and is the first model with its movement announced in 2008. Nicolas Rieussec of Montblanc His chronograph in his automatic, not only inherited the name from the legendary watchmaker. His creative spirit is still in place [21].

Explained in this way, I think that the careless person believes that Montblanc has been making watches since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Montblanc does not say that it has been making watches since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The person who invented this is brilliant. He/she discovered such stories and naturally connected them to fountain pens. Invent a story and history. That is why I think it is more of a creation than a fake or lie. I think we need to manage this creation [22].

### **To grow proprietary technologies: to enhance added value by re-extracting a declining product's existence value using technology**

The most important issue for Montblanc is to innovate not only in terms of products but also in terms of services. The case can be described as a human technology counterattack on machine technology. The fountain pen, Montblanc's main product, is a handwriting tool, and its *raison d'être* was threatened by the spread of personal computers and smartphones, forcing it to find a new value. The new value created has succeeded in increasing the value of the fountain pen, a tool for the act of ‘writing test by human hand,’ by combining low-tech and high-tech. During his interviews with the company's headquarters, the author was surprised and moved by the ‘Montblanc Bespoke Nib,’ a custom-made service for the ‘nib,’ the fountain pen's tip.

This system is capable of personalizing a pen tip based on writing diagnosis using a proprietary computer. It can instantly analyze five elements of a customer's ‘writing pressure,’ ‘writing speed,’ tilt angle,’ ‘rotation angle,’ and ‘amplitude angle’ to create the optimum pen tip by consideration fine points. Former CEO Lutz Bethge, views the situation in which modern consumers use modern technology in communication and the use of tools such as fountain pens are diminishing as a threat and a new opportunity.

In terms of social contribution, the company signed a partnership agreement with UNICEF in 2004, and since then, it has contributed to several programs with the shared goal of maintaining primary education and literacy programs for children around the world. Bethge, the former CEO, also enthusiastically speaks of the power and potential of the act of writing, handwritten signatures, the power of handwritten characters in a notebook, and the emotional value that results from writing, and argues that sales of writing tools have grown to reach 50% of total sales, and clearly distinguishes them from high-tech tools. He appreciates that his predecessor, Norbert Platt, phased out low-priced product lines and made it clear that Montblanc was a luxury brand. However, he emphasizes that the company only produces high-quality products and maintains its uncompromising stance through ‘Meisterstück,’ an icon product retained at the entry-level model.

With several companies creating products and services that would strangle themselves through unnecessary technology leveraging, Montblanc is innovating its services using technology to draw out the excellence of handwriting experience with handwriting tools. As shown above, concretizing technological prowess in the form of services and the approach and idea of expanding technology to produce innovation, which can be seen throughout the Richemont Group brands, are helpful for low-tech companies worldwide who may feel threatened by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). A “Museum of Writing” is currently under construction on the premises of the head office and fountain pen studio with the aim of opening in the spring of 2022. Regarding the low technology of “writing,” Executive Vice President said that Montblanc would make full use of high technology such as AI to appeal, and the author is looking forward to the completion.

### **Conclusion: How to leverage history, the place, people, and technology as brand components (management resources)**

This paper has demonstrated how Montblanc has converted brand components (management resources) to brand value. As shown in Section II, Montblanc's involvement in branding emphasizes the four major brand components (management resources) of history, place, people, and technology. We have provided spirited discussions on the four components and our perspectives. However, this is not the only correct answer. For starters, the literature on business does not provide management advice or predictions of the future of companies or industries. As the environment changes, so does the interpretation. Nevertheless, there is a discernible pattern of success. That is why we believe that it is meaningful to examine cases based on specific criteria. The strategy of a brand that has experienced succession and continues to shine today by overcoming changes in the environment is to ‘understand what you do well and make sure you do not become anyone else,’ continue to communicate that to others, and keep refining and enhancing the individuality [23].

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## Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of interest.

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