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Migration

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The Dual Nature of Social Capital: Support and Exclusion Among Thai Marriage Migrants in Austria

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Contents

Summary

This study examines the dynamics of social capital and the role of Thai-connotated spaces in fostering social relationships among Thai marriage migrants in Austria. It addresses a gap in migration studies concerning the dual nature of social capital and its spatial formation in small migrant communities. While existing research often emphasises the benefits of social capital in migrant integration, fewer studies explore its simultaneous

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exclusionary and conflict-inducing effects. Drawing on qualitative data supported by a survey, the findings reveal that Thai-connotated spaces, such as Thai temples, restaurants, and shops, act as vital hubs for bonding social capital, offering emotional and material support through networks of trust and reciprocity. These spaces enable migrants to navigate their new environments by sharing information on language learning, employment opportunities, and cultural adaptation while also fostering solidarity through shared experiences.

However, the study also uncovers the adverse effects of social capital, conceptualised as 'social shackles', where close-knit ties lead to exclusion, interpersonal conflicts, and social pressures. Jealousy, mistrust, and hierarchical relations often undermine mutual support, while cultural norms such as conspicuous consumption and the need to 'keep face' exacerbate tensions. Moreover, patriarchal control and exclusionary practices further marginalise certain individuals, illustrating the restrictive nature of social embeddedness within the Thai migrant communities.

Keywords: Social capital, Thai migrant women, marriage migrants, migration, integration, diaspora communities, gender and migration

Zusammenfassung

Die Dualität von Sozialkapital: Unterstützung und Ausgrenzung unter thailändischen Heiratsmigrantinnen in Österreich

In dieser Studie werden die Dynamiken von Sozialkapital und die Rolle thailändisch geprägter Räume im Zusammenhang mit der Förderung sozialer Beziehungen unter thailändischen Heiratsmigrantinnen in Österreich untersucht. Sie schließt eine Lücke in der Migrationsforschung in Bezug auf die doppelte Natur des Sozialkapitals und seine räumliche Verankerung in kleinen Migrantinnengemeinschaften. Während die bisherige Forschung häufig die Vorteile des Sozialkapitals bei der Integration von Migranten hervorhebt, untersuchen nur wenige Studien seine gleichzeitigen ausgrenzenden und konfliktauslösenden Auswirkungen. Basierend auf qualitativen Daten und ergänzt durch eine Umfrage, zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass thailändisch geprägte Räume wie Tempel, Restaurants und Geschäfte als zentrale Knotenpunkte für bindendes (‚bonding') Sozialkapital fungieren. Sie bieten emotionale und materielle Unterstützung durch Netzwerke des Vertrauens und der Reziprozität. Diese Räume ermöglichen es Migrantinnen, sich in ihrer neuen Umgebung zurechtzufinden, indem sie Informationen über Sprachkurse, Beschäftigungsmöglichkeiten und soziokulturelle Anpassung austauschen und gleichzeitig Solidarität durch gemeinsame Erfahrungen fördern.

Die Studie deckt jedoch auch die negativen Auswirkungen von Sozialkapital auf, die als ‚soziale Fesseln' bezeichnet werden können, bei denen enge Bindungen zu Ausgrenzung, zwischenmenschlichen Konflikten und sozialem Druck führen. Eifersucht, Neid, Misstrauen und hierarchische Beziehungen untergraben oft die gegenseitige Unterstützung, während kulturelle Normen wie demonstrativer Konsum und die Notwendigkeit, ‚das Gesicht zu wahren', die Spannungen verschärfen. Darüber hinaus werden bestimmte

Personen durch patriarchalische Kontrolle und ausschließende Praktiken weiter marginalisiert, was die restriktive Natur der sozialen Einbettung innerhalb der thailändischen Migrantinnengemeinschaften verdeutlicht.

Schlagwörter: Soziales Kapital, Thai-Migrantinnen, Heiratsmigration, Migration, Integration, Diaspora-Gemeinschaften, Geschlecht und Migration

1 Introduction

Numerous studies demonstrated the positive impacts of social capital in migration contexts, as it often aids in migrants' adaptation to new social, economic, and political environments (Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri 2020; Portes 1998)2020; Massey, 1993; Portes, 1998. Others focused on the role of support and social cohesion in promoting well-being and integration (de Haas 2010; Gërxhani and Kosyakova 2022) or as a source of resilience (Rockenbauch and Sakdapolrak 2017). However, a limited body of literature emphasises the 'dark' side of social capital, highlighting the potential negative consequences that social networks may have on the lives of migrants (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Strindlund et al. 2022). By exploring the potential negative consequences, such as exploitation, exclusion, and discrimination, this study offers a more nuanced perspective on the complexities of social capital in the context of migration.

The term social capital was initially coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James S. Coleman (1988), and further popularised by Robert D. Putnam (1993). It denotes resources embedded within relationships that enable cooperation and mutual support among individuals and groups. Social capital is often based on solidarity, reciprocity, trust, and moral obligations of support (Nee and Sanders 2001; Portes and Landolt 2000) and may be borne out of altruistic or instrumental motivation (Aguilar and Sen 2009; Portes 1998).

Moreover, few studies have specifically examined the role of social capital in the context of Thai international marriage migration (Sunanta 2022). In international marriage migration, one spouse moves to another country after marriage to join their partner (Charsley 2012). Marriage migration is the main driver for Thai long-term mobilities to Austria (and many other parts of Europe) and has been steadily growing over the last few decades (Butratana et al. 2022). While such partnerships often provide Thai women living in Austria and elsewhere in Europe with opportunities for social mobility and improved economic well-being, they also expose them to various vulnerabilities and challenges related to their new social environment (Butratana and Trupp 2021; Fresnoza-Flot and Sunanta 2022; Statham et al. 2020). The role of social capital in these women's lives remains understudied despite its potential to enhance and undermine their well-being.

Hence, this research aims to address two gaps. First, it addresses the dual nature of social capital by acknowledging its positive and negative effects on the lives of migrants. Second, it explores the spatial formation of social capital and its impacts on Thai female marriage migrants in a European context. The main research questions guiding this study

are: (1) How do Thai marriage migrants in Austria perceive and experience the benefits and challenges of social capital? (2) How do Thai-connotated spaces, such as temples, restaurants, and shops, contribute to the formation and mobilisation of social capital among Thai marriage migrants in Austria? Accordingly, this paper delves into the positively and negatively perceived and experienced aspects of the social capital of international marriage migrants, providing a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of its impacts on Thai migrants.

To capture the adverse effects of social capital, we introduce the concept of *'social shackles'*, a term that encapsulates the restrictive aspects of social embeddedness that compel individuals to conform to social expectations, navigate competitive social relations, and endure hierarchical structures within their migrant communities. The research aims to contribute to the existing literature on social capital and migration by shedding light on the specific experiences and challenges faced by Thai marriage migrants in Austria, a relatively under-researched group in migration studies. This paper adopts a qualitative approach supported by quantitative data. It draws on participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and a quantitative survey with Thai marriage migrants in Austria.

Following this introduction, a literature review discusses existing conceptualisations of social capital, highlighting the dual nature of positive and negative impacts and its relevance in migration studies. The following section focuses on the development of Thai marriage migration to Austria, aiming to contextualise the demographic and socioeconomic dimensions of this specific form of Thai outbound mobility. The methodology section outlines data collection and analysis processes, explaining the authors' role and positionality in the research process. The findings elucidate the spatial dimensions of social capital and the bright and dark sides of these relationships for Thai marriage migrants in Austria.

2 Literature Review: Social Capital and Migration

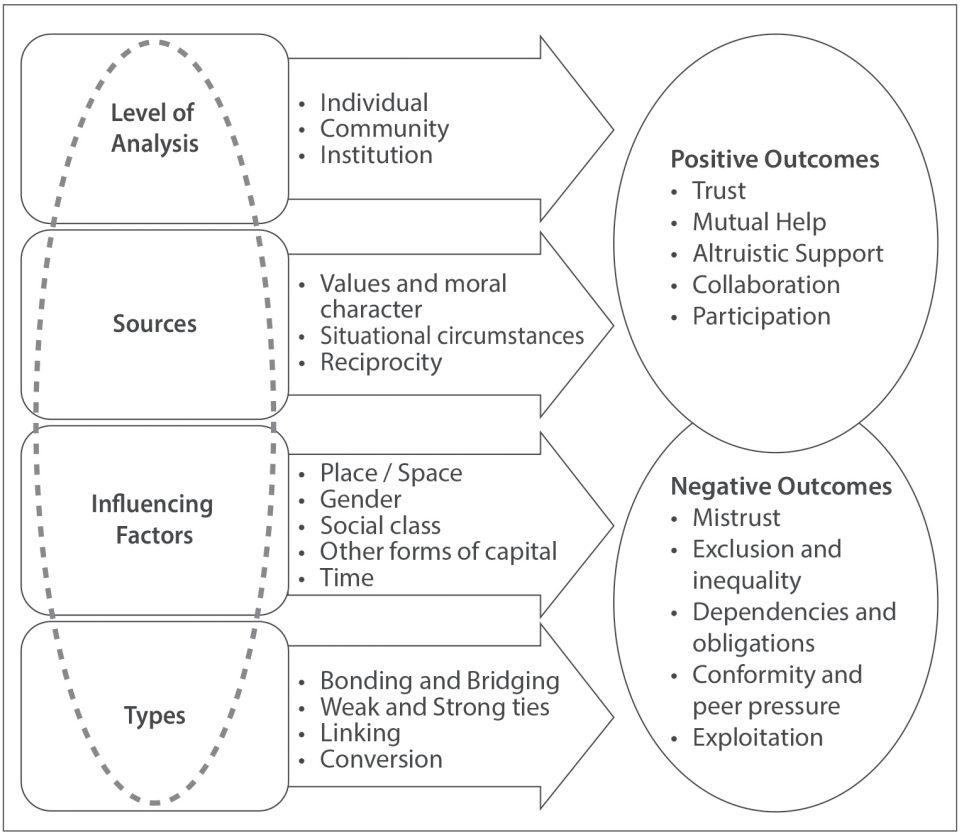
Understanding the role of social capital in migrant communities requires a comprehensive examination of its conceptual foundations, its potential drawbacks, and its specific manifestations in migration contexts. This chapter first outlines the theoretical underpinnings of social capital, drawing on key scholarly contributions that define and distinguish various types and sources of social capital. It then explores the negative outcomes of social capital, often referred to as its 'dark side', highlighting how exclusion, hierarchical structures, and internal conflicts can emerge within close-knit communities. Finally, the chapter examines the role of social capital in migrant communities, focusing on how it shapes integration processes, social support systems, and group dynamics.

2.1 Conceptualisations of Social Capital

One of the earliest definitions of social capital was put forth by Bourdieu (1986, p. 51), defining it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to pos-

session of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". Social capital refers to the relationships and norms facilitating social interactions and cooperation between individuals or within a community or organisation. Social capital is a resource that individuals and communities can draw upon to achieve their goals (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988). It is acquired via social relations and structures (Portes 1998).

It is important to distinguish between mobilisable social ties and networks that can bring benefits and those that cannot. For example, not every network based on kinship or ethnicity is beneficial. Failure to make this distinction may result in social capital being viewed as "a value-laden synonym for networks and ties" (Anthias 2007, p. 789). Social capital is a multidimensional concept (see Figure 1) that can lead to positive and negative outcomes. It has been applied in various ways in migration and development studies (Bebbington 2002; Silvey and Elmhirst 2003; Sunanta 2022; Trupp 2015; Turner and An Nguyen 2005)



Source: Own compilation, own design

Figure 1: Dimensions and possible outcomes of social capital

"Social capital is accumulated through social exchange over time and is reflected in the sentiments of obligation and solidarity" (Nee and Sanders 2001, p. 389). It builds upon different primary sources (Portes and Landolt 2000; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). First, this involves values and moral character of granting resources (for example, donations to the poor). Second, social capital can develop from situational circumstances where individuals or groups face similar challenges. Such forms of bounded or internal solidarity are based on group identity and are grounded in particular loyalties to a relevant in-group (Faist 1997). Third, reciprocity refers to the mutual exchange of favours, whereas favours given and received must be of the same type and value. Reciprocity in social capital often operates on a temporal scale, where support and favours are expected to be returned over time and not necessarily immediately. However, excessively delayed reciprocity can strain social ties and weaken trust within the community.

Social networks develop in various places, including religious places such as temples, work settings, neighbourhoods, and civic institutions, that represent a particular geographic and social space (Foster et al. 2015). The role of ethnic meeting places in fostering social capital has been explored in existing literature, particularly regarding how such spaces serve as hubs for support, social interaction, and economic activity (Dabringer and Trupp 2012). Studies on migrant businesses and informal gathering spaces highlight their functions as economic and social infrastructures that shape migrant communities and their (positive and negative) experiences (Haid 2017; Steigemann 2019).

However, it is crucial to recognise that social networks are not fixed in place and can extend beyond geographical and political boundaries. Studies on transnational (Basch et al. 1997; Statham et al. 2020) and translocal (Peth and Sakdapolrak 2020) migration highlight the strong connections between places of origin and destination of migrants. The proliferation of communication mediums such as mobile phones, apps, and air travel, as well as the globalisation of labour and capital, have given rise to new structures and forces that determine the trans-local or transnational embeddedness of international migrants. Hence, the geography of social networks or the spatial dimensions of social capital require further attention (Rutten et al. 2010).

Bourdieu (1986) argues that in order to accumulate and utilise social capital, individuals require both economic and cultural capital. He highlights that one form of capital can be converted into another. Consequently, social capital plays a crucial role in connecting the economic, social, and political domains, and it influences economic outcomes while being shaped by them (Çakmak et al. 2019; Sunanta 2022; Trupp 2017).

Another influential conceptualisation of social capital refers to it as "features of social organization", including "networks, norms, and trust" that enable individuals to act together and cooperate for mutual benefits (Putnam 1995, p. 664). Putnam (2000) also coined the distinction of *bonding and bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital pertains to relationships within a given group and lean towards reinforcing homogenous communities, such as in families, businesses, or ethnic minority groups. Bridging social capital happens across 'open' networks and serves as connections or 'bridges' between various groups and communities, making them considerably more diverse (Turner and An Nguyen 2005).

Weak and strong ties play distinct roles in social networks, influencing access to information, opportunities, and resources (Granovetter 1973). Strong ties usually involve long-term relations, emotional depth, intimacy, and reciprocal support between the involved parties, highlighting their considerable importance in fostering social relationships. Weak ties refer to social connections that are less close and emotional and are not consistently maintained, such as through acquaintances. Granovetter (1973) found that many people find employment opportunities through personal connections rather than formal job advertisements and discovered that these personal connections were typically acquaintances or weak ties rather than close friends or family members representing strong ties. The related concepts of 'bridges' (Burt 2001; Granovetter 1983; Putnam 2000) highlight the significance of external or outsider relationships that may enable the exchange of material and non-material resources among loosely linked actors.

In examining social capital, it is useful to distinguish relationships based on status and interests. However, there is a tendency to perceive groups or communities as homogeneous entities, disregarding power differentials that exist within them, particularly with regard to gender, class, and generation (Anthias 2007). Gender relations and gendered experiences affect the migration process and mobilisation of social capital because the gender of migrants can influence the information flow and trust available through social capital (Curran et al. 2005).

Accumulating social capital often necessitates that women challenge and overcome the negative stereotypes associated with their gender (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010). This reality holds particular relevance for Thai women living abroad, who frequently face negative stereotyping rooted in images of sex tourism and the mail-order bride (Butratana and Trupp 2021; Mix and Piper 2004). As a result, even though individuals may have access to the same social network, their positions within it may vary. To analyse the hierarchical nature of social ties within networks, Mayoux's (2001) notion of horizontal and vertical linkages is useful, conceptualising how individual actors can or cannot link with institutions, authorities, or other actors of higher socioeconomic or political status.

Gender significantly shapes the formation, use, and implications of social capital, often reflecting broader gendered power structures within societies. Women, particularly in migration contexts, may rely on bonding social capital, which emerges from close-knit relationships, to navigate new environments and secure emotional and practical support (Ryan 2011). However, these networks can reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting opportunities for individual autonomy or broader societal integration (Anthias 2007). Conversely, access to bridging social capital often intersects with gendered barriers, as women migrants may face restrictions due to cultural expectations, limited mobility, or labour market discrimination (Evergeti and Zontini 2006; Trupp 2015). The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) helps in understanding how gendered dynamics of social capital are further shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, education, and migration status, which can compound vulnerabilities or create differentiated access to resources and opportunities within migrant communities.

2.2 The Dark Side of Social Capital

Social capital is often considered beneficial for individuals, groups, and communities and has several positive outcomes, such as better health, job prospects, entrepreneurial success, integration, and increased civic engagement (Assheuer et al. 2013; Ehsan et al. 2019; Fuglerud and Engebrigtsen 2006). However, social capital is not always beneficial and can have adverse outcomes (Alcorta et al. 2020; Baycan and Öner 2023).

Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) were among the pioneers in drawing attention to the potential negative consequences of social capital, including the exclusion of outsiders due to community solidarity, as well as restrictions on individual autonomy and external contacts resulting from community norms. This implies that when members of a particular group attempt to extend their social capital to individuals outside their group, in-group members may impede such efforts. Moreover, outsiders may face difficulties accessing the group's social capital (Whittaker and Holland-Smith 2016). Hence, social capital can have exclusionary effects by reinforcing existing power structures and social inequalities. For example, social networks can exclude individuals who do not share the same values, norms, or characteristics (Portes and Landolt 2000). This can lead to the marginalisation of certain individuals or groups, such as immigrants, minorities, or those who are socially or economically disadvantaged (Woolcock and Narayan 2000).

Such processes also lead to homogenising members within a social group where only certain types of identities and opinions are tolerated (Strindlund et al. 2022). Close social relationships can create pressure to conform to group norms and discourage dissenting opinions (Burt 2001). Social capital may also promote group thinking and conformity, which can stifle innovation, creativity, and diversity (Strindlund et al. 2022). This can limit the diversity of ideas and perspectives and hinder individual and collective growth. Moreover, social capital can create dependencies and obligations that limit individual autonomy and agency. Individuals may feel obligated to reciprocate favours or support provided by their social networks, even if it conflicts with their own interests or goals (Putnam 2000). This can limit their ability to make independent decisions and pursue their own aspirations (Lin 2001).

Social capital can also expose individuals to negative influences such as moral hazard, mistrust, and corruption because it imposes heavy obligations and facilitates access to resources and opportunities not available through formal channels (Portes 1998; Villalonges-Olives and Kawachi 2017). Opportunities via informal networks may come with strings attached and may require individuals to engage in unethical or illegal behaviour. Moreover, inhibiting factors referred to as 'levelling pressures' work against individual attempts at social mobility by imposing limitations that keep individuals from disadvantaged groups in similar circumstances as their peers (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Actors that restrict social mobility, which is present in negative social capital, are not necessarily the community alone. Instead, these constraints can be observed within households or families. The power dynamics within families, particularly along gender and generational lines, can greatly influence the outcomes of positive or negative social capital (Zontini 2010).

2.3 Social Capital within Migrant Communities

One of the key areas of research on social capital in migration studies has been the role of social networks in facilitating migration and integration. Studies have shown that social networks are crucial in providing information and support to migrants, facilitating access to employment, housing, and other resources, and promoting social integration (Massey et al. 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). These findings highlight the importance of social capital in the migration process and have important implications for policies promoting migrant integration.

Research on social capital in migration studies has highlighted both its enabling and constraining effects, particularly in economic integration and well-being. Social capital can facilitate access to financial resources, business networks, and support structures, making it a crucial asset for migrant entrepreneurship (Trupp 2015; Sunanta 2022). However, access to these resources is not equally distributed, as gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies shape opportunities and exclusions within migrant networks (Anthias 2007; Mayoux 2001). Similarly, while social capital can enhance well-being by fostering social support and cohesion, it can also reinforce social control, discrimination, and exclusion, ultimately undermining mental health (Ehsan et al. 2019; McKenzie and Harpham 2006). These dual dynamics suggest that social capital should not be viewed as inherently beneficial but rather as contingent on broader social structures and power relations

In the Thai context, Brown (2022) emphasised that social capital, mainly through familial and social networks, is pivotal in providing support and administrative assistance for Thai nationals migrating to Europe through marriage. Social capital, derived from familial and community networks, serves as both a resource and a mechanism for navigating the challenges of transnational lives (Lapanun 2029). Studies show that Thai marriage migrants often rely on bonding social capital through family and close-knit community ties to access emotional support, financial resources, and information about migration pathways (Sunanta and Angeles 2013). However, the reliance on bonding social capital can also create vulnerabilities, such as dependence on family members for integration and economic stability (Butratana and Trupp 2021).

3 Marriage Migration and Thai Communities in Austria

This chapter explores the socio-spatial dynamics of marriage migration and the formation of Thai communities in Austria. The first section briefly discusses marriage migration, highlighting key factors influencing the migration trajectories of Thai women. The second section delves into the development and characteristics of Thai communities in Austria.

3.1 Marriage Migration

Marriage migration involves various forms of mobility. Charsley et al. (2012) identify three sub-forms of marriage-related migration: family formation, where a foreign spouse

migrates to join their partner; spousal reunification, in which a migrant later brings their spouse to their new country of residence; and other contexts, where marriage facilitates migration, such as dependent migration, where one partner accompanies the primary migrant. These patterns are shaped by broader socio-economic and cultural factors, resulting in diverse trajectories, including return, circular, or transnational migration (Ishii 2016; Charsley 2012). While marriage migration occurs across North-North, South-South, and North-South pathways, most global marriage migrants are women moving from the Global South to the Global North, paralleling female labour migration trends (Constable 2011; Fresnoza-Flot 2021).

Key drivers of transnational marriage migration include love and intimacy (Pananakhonsab 2018), economic disparities between origin and destination countries (Jones and Shen 2008) and the influence of media and migrant narratives in shaping aspirations for a better life (Lapanun 2019). In Thailand, transnational marriages often provide economic benefits, such as improved housing and financial stability (Angeles and Sunanta 2009), reinforcing migration aspirations.

3.2 Thai Migrants in Austria

The population of Thai migrants in Austria has increased over the past decades, coinciding with Thailand's emergence as a popular tourism destination for Austrian holidaymakers (Butratana et al. 2022). However, despite this growth, Thais in Austria remain a small immigrant group, comprising only about 4,700 individuals out of 1.3 million migrants (Statistik Austria 2018). More than 80 percent of this population is female, and almost two-thirds are married to Austrians (Statistik Austria 2018). This gender ratio of Thai migrants is similar in many other European countries (Fresnoza-Flot and Sunanta 2022). More than 60 percent of Thai citizens reside outside of Vienna in the provinces, as they are primarily marriage migrants and tend to follow their husbands to various locations (Butratana and Trupp 2014). Thai ethnic businesses such as restaurants, food shops, and spas are visible elements of Thai culture in Austria. However, Thai temples remain invisible to outsiders as they are located in apartments or business buildings (Butratana and Trupp 2011).

Labour migration from Thailand to Austria is not part of any bilateral agreement. However, different forms of Thai migrants exist, including independent migrant workers, entrepreneurs, students, and various officials (such as those working for the Thai embassy and consulate or UN organisations) (Butratana and Trupp 2011). There is no clear demarcation between these migrants, as some Thai women who enter Austria as students may eventually fall in love and marry an Austrian, while others may enter as tourists and later return as marriage migrants (Butratana and Trupp 2022). Nevertheless, since Austria has continuously implemented stricter immigration regulations over the last decades, obtaining permanent residence status has become more challenging for third-country nationals, including Thai marriage migrants (cf. Marriage without Borders n. d.). Among the requirements for obtaining an Austrian residence permit, Thai marriage migrants must demonstrate basic German language proficiency, health insurance,

sufficient means of subsistence (including a monthly net income of approximately EUR 1,900 as a couple), and adequate accommodation.

The decision to migrate from Thailand to Austria is often driven by factors such as economic opportunities, employment prospects, and the pursuit of a better life and resembles Thai migration dynamics in other European countries (Fresnoza-Flot and Sunanta 2022; Statham et al. 2020; Sunanta 2022). Many Thai migrants in Austria initially come to work in low-skilled jobs, such as in the hospitality and service industries and domestic work. They often face challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and adjusting to the Austrian way of life.

4 Method

The research for this study was conducted using a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews and participant observation, which was further supported by a quantitative survey. The unit of analysis consists of Thai women living in Austria who were married or in an intimate de facto relationship with Westerners/Austrians. The sample was spread across eight provinces in Austria, and data collection took place in various settings where the respondents felt comfortable.

Semi-structured interviews with 35 women were conducted in Thai language using a maximal variation sampling strategy (Suri 2011), representing the diversity of Thai female marriage migrants in Austria (Table 1). The interviews covered migration experiences, intimate relationships, marriage, and social life in Austria, as well as work experiences, relationships with other Thai migrants, relationships with families, and future plans.

No.	Name (coded)	Age	Region of origin in Thailand	Province of residence in Austria	Education before migration	Current occupation
1	Nueng	29	South	Vienna	Elementary	Unemployed
4	Niang	47	Northeast	Vienna	Elementary	Restaurant owner
5	Noi	54	Central	Upper Austria	Primary	Restaurant owner
6	Nid	36	South	Vienna	Bachelor	Employee
8	Noy	46	Northeast	Vienna	Elementary	Employee
9	Nu	36	Bangkok	Styria	Secondary	Unemployed
14	Nang	37	South	Styria	Secondary	Employee
15	Niam	43	Central	Vienna	Elementary	Employee
16	Nuk	39	Central	Vienna	Bachelor	Emplyee
18	Neen	44	Central	Vienna	Elementary	Business owner / self-employed

No.	Name (coded)	Age	Region of origin in Thailand	Province of residence in Austria	Education before migration	Current occupation
19	Nuan	34	Northeast	Vienna	Bachelor	Employee
23	Nai	42	North	Lower Austria	Elementary	Housewife
25	Na	43	Northeast	Vienna	Secondary	Massage owner
26	Nong	49	South	Vienna	Secondary	Housewife
27	Nee	50	Northeast	Tyrol	Primary	Sports instructor
29	Nuntida	47	Northeast	Tyrol	Primary	Business owner/ self-employed
30	Nien	42	Northeast	Tyrol	Elementary	Restaurant owner
33	Nut	48	Northeast	Lower Austria	Primary	Employee
34	Nuch	38	Northeast	Vienna	Secondary	Instructor
35	Ploy	48	North	Lower Austria	Primary	Business owner/ self-employed
38	Prang	23	Northeast	Styria	Elementary	Employee
39	Pla	55	Northeast	Styria	Bachelor	Employee
40	Pat	77	North	Styria	Bachelor	retired
43	Prem	48	Central	Styria	Primary	Employee
53	Pai	29	Bangkok	Vienna	Bachelor	Employee
58	Peet	65	Central	Vienna	Higher Vocational	Retired
59	Pa	49	East	Vienna	Primary	Massage owner
61	Pin	47	Northeast	Lower Austria	Primary	Employee
68	Pom	48	Bangkok	Vienna	Bachelor	Employee
72	Pong	52	Central	Vienna	Secondary	Employee
76	Pim	32	South	Vienna	Bachelor	Business owner/ self-employed
78	Ping	47	North	Vienna	Secondary	Massage owner
80	Pee	66	Northeast	Lower Austria	Primary	Housewife
83	Porn	46	North	Burgenland	Higher Vocational	Massage owner
85	Pet	45	Central	Vienna	Primary	Employee

Source: Own survey, own compilation

Table 1: List of interviews

In addition, the study used purposive sampling to select 85 Thai women who were married or in an intimate de facto relationship with Austrians. The survey covered topics such as socioeconomic background, the role of social relations, marriage life, and migration experience, involving closed and open questions.

Furthermore, the authors also engaged in observation with different levels of participation in various settings, such as Thai Buddhist temples, Thai restaurants, bars, and Thai festivals in Austria. During participant observation, informal interviews and go-along conversations occurred (Kusenbach 2003). Participant observation further helped to understand Thai women's everyday practices and experiences, leading to enhanced interpretation of the data (Kawulich 2005). The authors have built trust and ties with Thai marriage migrants for over ten years, allowing participation in everyday activities and invitations into their households and workplaces.

However, the authors acknowledge the limitations of insider research and the need to reveal the relationship between researchers and respondents (Dolezal et al. 2020). The first author is a female Thai migrant, and being an insider researcher enabled access to different Thai communities in Austria. However, the insider perspective can lead to better access and trust on the one hand and mistrust and blockade on the other (Ryan 2015).

The data were analysed using qualitative coding techniques based on Corbin and Strauss (2014). Via open and axial coding patterns and themes were identified and related to social capital in the migration experience. The qualitative data from interviews and participant observations were documented via fieldnotes and transcriptions, and subsequently coded, and categorised into overarching themes, ensuring an iterative process of refining codes to capture nuanced perspectives. Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively to complement the qualitative findings, providing broader context.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Role of Thai-Connotated Spaces in Building Social Capital

The findings in Table 2 demonstrate the role of Thai-connotated places in Austria and their connection to social capital for Thai marriage migrants. Thai temples, restaurants, and shops serve as important social and cultural hubs that facilitate bonding social capital and support networks within the Thai migrant community.

Thai temples are among the most frequently visited Thai-connotated spaces, with 86 percent of respondents indicating that they visit these temples regularly or on special occasions. The significant connection to these temples highlights their dual role in spiritual and social functions. Visiting to make merit (85 %) and meet Thai people (52 %) indicates that temples are not only spaces for religious practices but also central places for building and maintaining connections within the Thai community in Austria. Many respondents know these temples through their Thai friends (69 %), highlighting the importance of bonding social capital within close-knit social groups.

Place	Items	No.*	Percent**
Thai Temple	I visit Thai temples in Austria	73	86
	– Regularly	19	22
	– On special occasions	57	67
	I know them through		
	– Friends	59	69
	– Husband	9	11
	– Myself	4	5
	– Relatives	3	4
	I visit together with my husband		
	– Regularly	15	18
	– On special occasions	29	34
	I visit them to make a merit	72	85
	I visit them to meet Thai people	44	52
	I visit them to do business	12	14
	I visit them to get or share information	18	21
Thai Restaurant	I visit Thai restaurants in Austria	77	91
	– Regularly	31	37
	– On special occasions	51	60
	I know them through		
	– Friends	42	49
	– Myself	18	21
	– Owner	9	11
	– Husband	8	9
	I visit together with my husband		
	– Regularly	15	18
	– On special occasions	29	34
	I visit them to meet Thai people	60	71
	I visit them to do business	10	12
	I visit them to get or share information	19	22
Thai Shops	I visit Thai shops in Austria	79	93
	– Regularly	45	53
	– On special occasions	36	42
	I know them through		
	– Friends	61	72
	– Myself	11	13
	– Owner	8	9
	– Husband	3	4
	I visit together with my husband		
	– Regularly	15	18
	– On special occasions	29	34
	I visit them to go shopping	80	94

Place	Items	No.*	Percent**
Thai Shops	I visit them to meet Thai people	50	59
	I visit them to do business	17	20
	I visit them to get or share information	18	21

* ... Number of the interviewee; – ** Percentage of all interviewees

Source: Own survey (n = 85)

Table 2: Role of Thai meeting places in Austria

These social connections often extend beyond the temple itself, facilitating social networks where information is shared, and mutual support is provided. For example, Thai women discussed updates on visa and residency regulations, shared advice on family issues – including recommendations for divorce lawyers – and provided information about *'Frauenhaus'*, an institution that supports women in need. This was shared by a woman who suffered violence from her (now ex-)husband in Austria. Additionally, they exchange tips for learning German, share details about Thai cultural events in Austria, and inform one another about job opportunities. The relatively lower percentage of participants visiting temples for business or information exchange (21 %) suggests that the temples' primary function lies in social and cultural cohesion rather than commercial activities.

Thai restaurants (91 % visit rate) also emerge as vital venues for socialising and maintaining connections with the Thai community in Austria, with 71 % of respondents visiting to meet Thai people. Like temples, restaurants are social spaces where bonding social capital is reinforced, often visited with friends (49 %) or husbands (29 %). These restaurants also serve as informal sites for gathering and exchanging information (22 %), demonstrating how social capital at this location can extend to practical purposes, such as navigating life in Austria or sharing everyday life experiences.

Interestingly, the role of Thai restaurants in doing business (10 %) or meeting for formal purposes is relatively minimal compared to the temple setting, which points to the more informal, social nature of these places in the Thai migration experience. Doing business in these Thai spaces primarily refers to informal economic activities within the migrant community, such as selling Thai food among peers. In addition, these spaces serve as informal venues for discussing formal business ventures, including Thai restaurants, shops, and massage establishments, facilitating knowledge exchange and economic networking.

Thai shops (93 % visit rate) indicate a substantial percentage of respondents visiting regularly (53 %). These shops are essential for shopping, as 94 percent of participants visit for this purpose. However, their social role is also prominent, with 59 percent visiting to meet Thai people, which shows that these shops are not merely functional but are also social spaces that help maintain ties to Thailand. As with temples and restaurants, shops foster bonding social capital by offering a platform to connect with others in the community, share information, and exchange resources. Interestingly, Thai shops also serve as

venues for business-related activities (18 %), signifying the multifaceted nature of these spaces. The higher percentage of respondents visiting with husbands (29 %) compared to the other places may indicate the role of shops as shared spaces for couples to participate in the broader Thai migrant community.

Moreover, during the summer months, a small part of Vienna's Danube Island becomes a vibrant gathering space for Thai migrants, where social interactions and informal economic activities, such as picnicking and food vending, take place. While these gatherings primarily attract Thai migrants and some of their Austrian partners, they have also begun to draw a more diverse crowd eager to experience authentic Thai cuisine. Similar, though larger in scale, communal activities within Thai migrant communities have been documented in Berlin, where public spaces serve as important sites for both cultural expression and economic exchange (Haid 2017).

In addition to these Thai-connotated spaces, German language classes are important venues where Thai women meet and interact. Due to the language requirements for residence and employment in Austria, many Thai marriage migrants enroll in German language courses, which provide opportunities for socialising with other migrants. Beyond language acquisition, these classes provide opportunities for socialising with other migrants and building connections that facilitate integration into Austrian society. However, as illustrated by Ploy (*see Table 1, as well as for all other interviewees whose coded names are mentioned in the following*), the extent to which these interactions translate into meaningful support networks can vary. For instance, Ploy further noted that her Thai friends could not assist her with Austria-related issues due to their limited proficiency in reading or writing in German. Such experiences also make them potential sites of frustration when structural or individual challenges limit their efficacy.

While Thai-connotated spaces such as temples, restaurants, shops, and language schools are important for mobilising social capital among Thai marriage migrants in Austria, the limited accessibility for those living outside of Vienna and other urban areas presents a significant challenge. Over 60 percent of Thai citizens reside in provincial areas (Statistik Austria 2018), where access to these cultural and social resources is restricted due to their concentration in urban centres. This geographic disparity exacerbates the challenges faced by marriage migrants, particularly those who depend on these spaces for socialisation, cultural continuity, and community support. Without regular access to these spaces, migrants may struggle to maintain strong social ties, potentially limiting the formation of social capital and hindering the ability to share crucial information and resources.

5.2 Solidarity and Networks of Support

The qualitative data shows that information sharing plays a crucial role in fostering social capital among Thai marriage migrants in Austria. Nueng shared how Thai friends in Vienna become central in the dissemination of valuable information, ranging from local events such as Thai festivals and markets and activities to practical matters like German language studies, job opportunities, and school regulations for children. This

network of support enables individuals to navigate their new environment, relying on bonding social capital to maintain close-knit relationships and share resources. Information sharing thus strengthens social ties, providing both emotional and instrumental support, which aligns with the theoretical foundation of social capital, where trust and reciprocity are key features within close groups (cf. Putnam 2000; Woolcock 2001).

Noy highlighted examples of material support within the Thai migrant community, such as financial contributions to assist friends during emergencies, including funding flights home to Thailand, aiding during illnesses, or covering funeral expenses. These acts of solidarity demonstrate how reciprocity and empathy strengthen social cohesion within the community. Nong further noted that shared living conditions and similar socio-economic circumstances foster stronger bonds. She explained that her Thai close friend has a life just like she has and hence they talk and share a lot. This highlights how common experiences and shared struggles mobilise social capital by creating spaces of mutual understanding and support (cf. Trupp 2015).

Geographical and cultural commonalities also play an important role. Nien revealed that her friendships primarily involve Thai women from Isaan, Thailand's socioeconomically weaker region, which also has distinct linguistic and cultural features, such as specific food. The shared language and cultural background establish a sense of belonging, reinforcing the role of regional identity in cultivating bonding social capital. Beyond emotional and material support, practical advice on navigating family issues (for example, sharing information on Thai women's children born in Austria can improve their Thai language skills) and cross-cultural relationships emerged as a common theme. For instance, one participant shared a strategy for communicating needs within her intercultural marriage: *"If you want presents like a watch or jewelry from your husband, you must ask directly. 'Phua Farang' [Western husband] does not understand what makes us happy unless we tell them"* (Nuk). Similarly, Ploy explained how Thai friends provide guidance on living with Austrian partners, sharing advice on cultural expectations and relationship dynamics.

5.3 'Social Shackles'

The concept of *'social shackles'* emerged out of the empirical data and builds upon existing critiques of social capital by emphasising how tightly bound communities can hinder rather than help individuals. In the Thai migrant context, obligations tied to reciprocity, status-based exclusion, and patriarchal expectations create a form of social entrapment that influences economic behaviour, social relationships, and personal autonomy. By conceptualising these restrictive dynamics as *social shackles*, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migrant social capital, particularly within Southeast Asian migratory settings.

The findings of this study reveal two main themes that highlight the adverse effects on the Thai migrant communities in Austria: (1) jealousy and mistrust, and (2) exclusion and hierarchical relations. These themes underscore the complexities of social capital, where negative consequences counterbalance its benefits. Below, these themes are critically dis-

cussed and contextualised against the existing literature on the dark side of social capital and the emergence of our new concept, *social shackles.*

Jealousy and Mistrust

The theme of jealousy and mistrust is evident in statements such as "Thais in Austria do not love each other and do not have any harmony/unity" (Niam) and "They are always jealous and cannot see others have better life" (Noi). Thai migrants often experience interpersonal conflicts rooted in jealousy and materialism, as noted by Noy, who described Thai migrants as "crazy for brand names" and willing to exploit others for personal gain.

Noy's critique of Thai individuals who are "crazy for brand names" and willing to burden others to obtain luxury items underscores the role of conspicuous consumption (cf. Veblen 1957), where individuals display material goods to signal wealth and social standing, often as a way of gaining respect or envy from others. Such displays become a tool for achieving symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986), a form of prestige and recognition within the social field.

Just as Thai tourists in Austria use material consumption to establish a sense of distinction in a foreign cultural context (Bui and Trupp 2020), Thai migrants might employ conspicuous consumption to navigate and negotiate their social identities in their migrant communities. For instance, pursuing brand-name goods reflects an effort to project success and gain recognition among peers. This behaviour is likely amplified in a migratory setting, where individuals often need to assert their status to counter feelings of marginalisation or meet societal expectations tied to migration success. That is, the expectation that migration should lead to upward mobility and financial prosperity, which migrants may feel pressured to visibly demonstrate through material possessions.

Some respondents further shared that they have had negative experiences within their own community, highlighting issues of trust and jealousy. For example, Nut describes a business betrayal and her frustration over a money loan that was never returned. These personal accounts reflect the underlying tension and mistrust that can develop within close-knit migrant communities.

Niang adds that Thais often refrain from sharing the reality of their struggles: "None of the Thais who live in Austria will tell the truth about how tough life here is and what they have to go through." Such attitudes and practices can perpetuate a culture of suspicion and guardedness. These findings show the role of cultural and societal norms in amplifying these tendencies, such as 'saving face' and a focus on hierarchy, social status, and material wealth, which are embedded in Thai society (cf. Selby 2011).

These findings contribute to the literature on the adverse effects of bonding social capital, which can foster parochialism, distrust, and competitive social comparisons (cf. Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Strindlund et al. 2022). Within tight-knit and smaller communities, such dynamics can undermine mutual trust and erode the positive aspects of social support. The pressure to maintain appearances, even at the cost of personal well-being, exemplifies how *social shackles* operate: tying individuals to collective expectations that restrict their autonomy and reinforce competitive social norms.

Exclusion and Hierarchical Relations

Exclusion is a significant theme that shapes the experiences of Thai migrants in Austria. Many respondents described how gossip, competition, and a lack of sincerity prevent meaningful connections within the community. For example, Nuk pointed out that "Thais like to gossip, compare who has a better life or is much wealthier", while Pla noted the common saying among Thais in Austria: "Less Thais, less problems."

Similarly, Nuan highlighted how some Thais focus on comparing life conditions, creating a culture where individuals are judged based on material success or perceived social standing. This leads to status-based exclusion, where those deemed 'lower' in the hierarchy are marginalised within the community. Hence, hierarchical relations within the Thai migrant community are critical, where social comparisons and biases against certain groups perpetuate inequality. Nid, for instance, admitted to looking down on Thai women who work in massage parlours or struggle with gambling addiction. Nu criticised others for their ostentation and boastful behaviour, which fuels competition and judgment.

This exclusion is not merely about social distance but also reflects a transactional approach to relationships, where reciprocity is seen as burdensome. Pla avoided seeking help from fellow Thais, perceiving it as a scenario where "there is no free lunch", highlighting a lack of trust in community support. Similarly, Neen reduced contact with other Thais due to perceived insincerity.

Moreover, the political divide between the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt supporters in Thailand also manifested within Thai migrant communities in Austria, leading to tensions and social fragmentation. Political allegiances became a source of division, with some individuals severing ties with friends and acquaintances who held opposing views. This rift fostered an atmosphere of mistrust, weakening social cohesion within the communities. As a result, networks that once provided support and solidarity were strained, illustrating how transnational political conflicts can shape and disrupt migrant social capital even in a foreign context.

These dynamics resonate with the literature on political aspects of transnationalism (cf. Bauböck 2003) and further show how exclusive networks within hierachised communities can restrict access to resources and foster mistrust (cf. Mayoux 2001). Exclusionary practices prevent individuals from fully benefiting from their social ties, undermining the broader potential of social capital to build resilience and foster inclusion.

Moreover, as outlined above, the emphasis on material symbols of success can alienate those unable to participate in conspicuous consumption, leading to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. Hierarchical relations are a documented downside of social capital, as they often reproduce social stratification and inequality (cf. Bourdieu 1986). These dynamics can be particularly damaging in migrant communities, where individuals often rely on various forms of support to navigate shared and diverse experiences.

Among Thai migrants in Austria, social hierarchies may shape interactions and access to resources, sometimes leading to divisions that affect collective engagement and reinforce existing power imbalances. These findings highlight the restrictive nature of social

shackles, where social ties, instead of fostering inclusivity and support, can create boundaries that limit access to resources and emotional security.

5.4 Social Capital and Patriarchal Control

The final theme of patriarchal control concerns the role of Austrian husbands in blocking the formation of internal social capital. Social capital relies on trust, reciprocity, and networks that enable individuals to access resources and support. However, when external forces, such as patriarchal control, restrict access to social networks or stigmatise certain spaces (e.g., Thai ethnic businesses or community gatherings), the formation and utilisation of social capital become inhibited.

Several respondents described being isolated due to their husbands' concerns about gossip, conflicts, or cultural misunderstandings within the Thai community. For example, Nong likened her experience to being a "little bird in a golden cage", with her husband discouraging her from forming relationships with other Thais or Austrians. Nuch provided a particularly stark example, where her husband controlled her Facebook account to monitor her interactions. Such restrictions often stem from husbands' negative perceptions of Thai women's social networks, which they see as sources of potential trouble or distraction. As shown by Butratana and Trupp (2021), husbands, in some cases, actively discourage or outright prevent their Thai wives from working in Thai ethnic businesses, such as massage parlours or bars, due to the negative connotations associated with these spaces. These businesses are often stigmatised as "bad environments" because of associations with sex work or erotic massages.

Such restrictions have broader implications. By blocking access to employment opportunities in Thai-dominated spaces, husbands curtail their partners' chances of building financial independence and limit their ability to participate in Thai social networks. These spaces, such as restaurants, massage parlours, or Thai grocery stores, often serve as hubs for community interaction and mutual support. Denying women access to them effectively isolates them from their ethnic community, further entrenching dependency on their husbands.

In these cases, the adverse effects on social capital arise indirectly, as women cannot engage with their communities freely. The control exerted by their partners hinders their ability to build trust, reciprocity, and support within Thai networks, reflecting a broader structural issue rather than a flaw in social capital itself. While patriarchal control can restrict access to social capital, social relations among Thai women in similar situations can serve as a key resource for mutual support, including sharing information about safe spaces such as 'Frauenhäuser' (women's shelters) (cf. Ruenkaew 2017). Reciprocity remains a crucial factor in these networks, as women provide emotional and practical support to each other in navigating restrictive or abusive relationships. However, power imbalances both within partnerships and in different social spaces affect the ability to mobilise social capital effectively. Future research could further examine how spatial factors and hierarchies influence Thai women's access to support networks and potential avenues for resistance.

6 Conclusion

Social capital has been used as a concept to understand the social and economic integration of migrants in host societies. It is a multi-layered construct that has been used to explain the importance of social networks and relationships for migrants' economic and social outcomes. While previous research has addressed the role of social capital in migrants' lives, most studies have focused on its positive effects, such as facilitating integration, adaptation, and well-being (cf. Portes 1998; de Haas 2010).

This study advances the understanding of the spatial and geographical dimensions of social capital by examining the role of Thai-connotated spaces in fostering networks of support among Thai marriage migrants in Austria. These spaces, encompassing temples, festivals, and informal gatherings, are critical hubs where bonding social capital is nurtured (cf. Putnam 2000). They facilitate the exchange of information, emotional and material support, and shared cultural experiences, enabling migrants to navigate their new social environments more easily. This highlights the spatiality of social capital, illustrating how physical and symbolic spaces contribute to the creation and reinforcement of social ties that benefit migrants' well-being and integration. These findings extend the conceptualisation of social capital by underscoring the importance of place-based interactions in migratory settings (cf. Haid 2017; Steigemann 2019).

The limited opportunities for Thai migrants in rural areas to connect with diverse social groups highlight the need for geographically targeted interventions. Initiatives could include mobile cultural resource programmes, community outreach events, or subsidised transportation to cultural hubs. These efforts, which could be implemented by local government agencies, migrant support organisations, and Thai community associations, would mitigate isolation and support the integration of Thai migrants into their ethnic communities and the broader Austrian society.

At the same time, the study underscores the dual nature of social capital by revealing its adverse impacts within a relatively small and tightly knit migrant community. This study introduces the concept of *social shackles* to describe the restrictive and sometimes oppressive effects of social capital within the Thai migrant community in Austria. While previous literature acknowledges the downsides of social capital (cf. Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), the term social shackles offers a more precise term for understanding how social networks can act as a binding force that limits individual choices, reinforces hierarchical structures, and perpetuates social expectations. For instance, displays of conspicuous consumption and materialism and a reluctance to share personal struggles foster a culture of suspicion and guardedness. By conceptualising social shackles, this study contributes to broader discussions on migration and social capital, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where cultural norms around reciprocity, hierarchy, and face-saving play a significant role in shaping migrant experiences.

The findings further show how the lived experiences of Thai marriage migrants in Austria are shaped by intersecting dimensions of gender, class, ethnicity, and migration status, which collectively influence their access to social capital, exposure to social control, and vulnerability to exclusionary practices. The research contributes to the literature highlighting the darker sides of social capital, where excessive bonding can reinforce

divisions between in-group and out-group members and undermine trust. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies that not only leverage the benefits of social capital but also mitigate its potential harms, particularly in small migrant communities where social interactions are intensified.

Future research should explore how *social shackles* operate across different migrant communities and examine potential strategies for mitigating their restrictive effects while maintaining the benefits of social ties. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and community initiatives that foster more inclusive and empowering migrant networks.

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