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Refugee Foodways: How Ethnic Cuisines Can Help Newcomers to Integrate in Canada

ABSTRACT

This study examines the integration of refugees in Toronto, many of whom have become entrepreneurs in the food industry in the safe haven of Canada, often fleeing war and persecution in their home countries. The author examines the “ethnic enclaves” such as Chinatown and Koreatown, and other emerging sites of ethnicity. Using a sociological case study of a Syrian restaurant, she explores government initiatives to help refugees establish their businesses. In her investigation, the author studies the media portrayal of their businesses in local newspapers, variously, as successful or as victims of hate crime, pointing out shortfalls in the coverage and the need for greater government support. She finds that many refugees not only want to succeed in their new lives, but to also give back to the new community they belong to. She concludes that simply consuming ethnic food does not guarantee one will not express racism or hatred toward another ethnic group, and voicing support for ethnic businesses is also not sufficient to claim to be “not racist.”

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The social practice of “breaking bread” or having a meal together serves the purpose of bringing eaters together to share a common experience and enjoy food. It can result in an affirmation of trust, confidence, and comfort in an atmosphere of communal eating. R.I.M. Dunbar’s study on social eating found “[t]hose who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support” (2017: 198). Furthermore, the study found that, “[A] path analysis suggests that the causal direction runs from eating together to bondedness rather than the other way around” (Ibid.) This idea suggests that strangers or acquaintances can eat together and still achieve such a bond rather than needing a connection first to achieve the bond. To this end, Dunbar argues, “[s]ocial eating may have evolved as a mechanism for facilitating social bonding” (Ibid.) Moreover, he states, “[A] path analysis suggests a clear causal pathway in which eating social dinners both correlates with clique size and increases life satisfaction, and that enhanced satisfaction in turn increases one’s happiness, trust in others and sense that life is worthwhile [. . .]” and, ultimately, “[t]rustingness and the feeling that life is worthwhile all positively enhance engagement in the community (independently of life satisfaction)” (Ibid.: 205). In addition, the research argues that “[o]ne eats with people as a way of creating and servicing relationships” (Ibid). If this is true, then social eating can result in trust building and a stronger community engagement.

This paper explores if this phenomenon can be applied to situations where at least two different cultures are exposed to each other and bond over an ethnic cuisine. To be clear, this paper reviews

ethnic entrepreneurship in the Canadian food industry and its potential to integrate different ethnicities within the community. More specifically, if it is the case that ethnic cuisine and, thus, ethnic food businesses can bring people together to create bonds, then it is important to determine the extent to which these types of businesses are supported.

First, the article presents a discussion on ethnic entrepreneurship in Canada. Second, it evaluates the success of Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), in the City of Toronto, to determine if there is evidence of integration through the support of ethnic businesses in these areas, based on the popularity of the cultural events they host. BIAs are both public- and privately-funded through financial incentives such as a Commercial Facade Improvement Program, Main Street Innovation Fund, Local Leadership Fund, Outside Mural & Street Art Program, Streetscape Improvement Program, and Streetscape Master Plan Program. There are also City of Toronto partnership investment grants such as Arts & Cultural Grants, Community Funding Investment Programs, Toronto Atmospheric Fund, and Toronto Urban Health Fund (BIA Financial Incentives n.d.) In terms of government funding or support for ethnic refugees, the Government of Canada assists through the Resettlement Assistant Program (RAP), which provides “[i]mmediate and essential supports for their most basic needs” (Government of Canada, “What Kind of Support do Government-assisted Refugees Get?” 2022). Interestingly, a study from 2020 found that “[p]rivately sponsored refugees (PSRs) had higher employment rates and earnings than government-assisted refugees (GARs), particularly during the initial settlement period, even after taking into account differences in education, official language ability, and other observed socio-demographic characteristics, although the differences



diminished over time. The PSR advantage was particularly noticeable among less-educated refugees” (Kaida, Hou & Stick 2019: 5).

This section will refer to the “ethnic enclave debate” to assess the diversity of these BIAs. Then, it will examine how ethnic businesses are portrayed in the media in three major Canadian newspapers, and it will assess whether these stories help or hinder integration. It will use a specific case study of a Syrian business that was forced to close after receiving messages of hate and death threats. Ultimately, the “breaking bread” theory seems to hold true to an extent at least at the community level based on the popularity of cultural events as people come together to experience other cultures. The portrayals in the media, however, reduce ethnic food businesses to a cultural trend. There is a lack of recognition of these businesses as legitimate business entrepreneurship which could foreseeably limit real business opportunities and, ultimately, success.

Ethnic Entrepreneurship

This article is located in the context of a growing demand for labor that is not being met by the natural birth rate of Canadian citizens (Martel 2019: 1), and a global migration crisis since 2015 which Canada’s policies have increasingly tried to address with private sponsorships of refugees as well as the acceptance of asylum-seekers (Government of Canada 2016). As these displaced populations find new homes they are often in foreign lands with different cultures, languages, religions, and food. Historically, the expectation has been that immigrants will adapt and assimilate to new cultures, but people naturally want to hold on to traditions from their homelands.

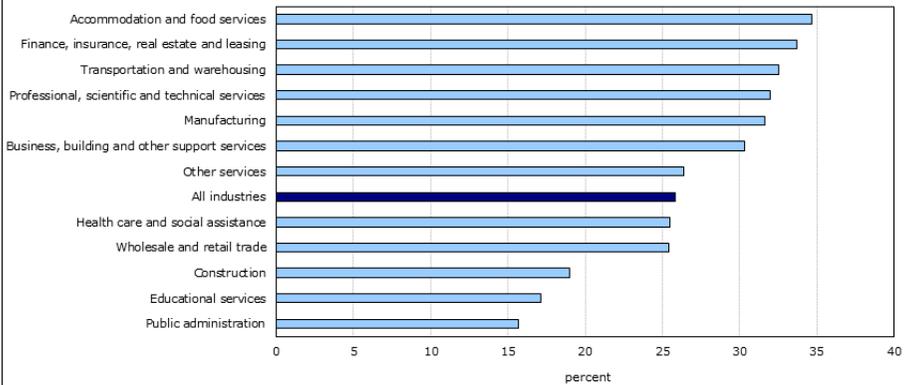
In particular, foodways are something that people hold on to. Not only is food needed to survive, it can also be a source of comfort. Food is symbolic in many social systems. A large body of research has

evaluated how people adhere to, or change, their food customs in new countries for their own personal comfort or to bond with similar ethnic groups in new territory.¹

This article, however, argues that foodways can be extended to *different* communities as a connector. In other words, it explores how the introduction of ethnic cuisines, and especially significant dishes into a new culture, leads to exposure and potential integration through an eating experience. For immigrants, this is a way of not only preserving their sense of home but also allows for adapting their food to a new environment with the influence of new community members that have embraced it. Such collaboration is particularly important as it transcends not only serving populations in ethnic enclaves to provide a sense of home, but also for nationals to be introduced to an immigrant's way of life so they can experience a touch of the immigrant's homeland.

Immigrants are most likely to work in food service, according to a Canadian Labor Force survey, a finding that signifies the importance of food for this group. Moreover, a 2016 Statistics Canada census, shows that 53 percent of food business owners in Canada are immigrants with that amount increasing to 59 percent for the province of Ontario (Immigration Matters in Food Services). The UN Refugee Agency's report, "Are Refugees Good for Canada? A Look at Canadian Refugee Integration," finds that 14 percent of refugees who have been in Canada for between 10 to 30 years are entrepreneurs, which leads to refugees creating jobs for themselves and Canadians (2019: 9).

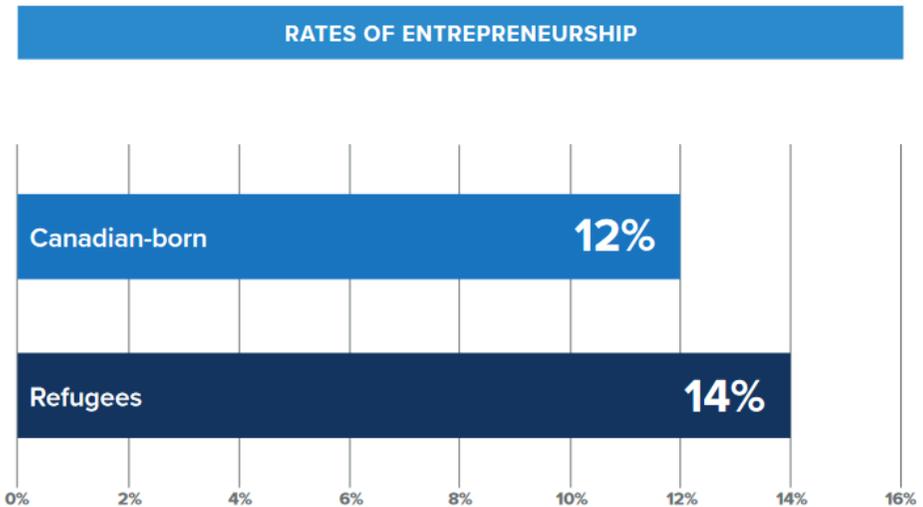
¹ J.M. Newman and R. Linke (1982), "Chinese Immigrant Food Habits: A Study of the Nature and Direction of Change," *Royal Society of Health Journal*, vol. 102, no. 6 (1982): 268–271. doi:10.1177/146642408210200613; and Vivian Nun Halloran, *The Immigrant Kitchen: Food, Ethnicity, and Diaspora* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016).

**Chart 14****As a share¹ of total employment, core-aged immigrants are more likely to work in accommodation and food services as well as in other industries, 2017**

1. Selected major industries accounting for 92% of total employment.
Source: Labour Force Survey, custom tabulations.

Source: Lahouaria Yssaad and Andrew Fields (2018), “The Canadian Immigrant Labour Market: Recent Trends from 2006–2017,” The Immigrant Labour Force Analysis Series, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-606-x/71-606-x2018001-Eng.pdf>.

People who oppose immigration generally make two arguments based on assumptions that (1) immigrants cannot assimilate (Scoppio & Winter 2020: 93), and/or (2) immigrants will be a financial burden (Sands & Jackson 2020: 78). Ethnic or immigrant entrepreneurship, particularly in the food industry, has the potential to address and dispel these perceptions. Increasingly, whether it is in cultural “mosaic” countries like Canada or “melting pot” countries like the United States of America, there are a number of ethnic restaurant businesses, run by ethnic entrepreneurs. Restaurant ownership has been an important way of making a life in a new society since at least the 1970s in Canada (Smart 2003: 313). Unlike in past history, however, where ethnic entrepreneurs were largely economic migrants, increasingly refugees are entering the industry (Bizri 2017: 852).



Source: UNHCR CANADA (2019), "Are Refugees Good For Canada? A Look at Canadian Refugee Integration." Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Are-Refugees-Good-for-Canada-A-Look-at-Canadian-Refugee-Integration-English.pdf>.

It is important to differentiate between an economic migrant and a refugee. There is an accusation that refugees are just economic migrants who were not accepted through the proper channels, so they claimed asylum to expedite the process. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this debate, however, for the purposes of this essay, the assumption and belief is that refugees are experienced and skilled individuals who are also fleeing persecution and war.

Refugees pursue ethnic entrepreneurship for a number of reasons. They do so not only to make a living but also to become part of their new communities as well as to give back to the societies that they have entered. In the case of food, the receiving countries benefit not only because they are introduced to new cuisines, but often ethnic restaurant businesses can create jobs and other opportunities. For example, M.M. Rahman's study on Bangladeshi entrepreneurs in Ontario, Canada found grocery stores and restaurants in particular to be innovative. Rahman explains,



Given the nature of micro-enterprises, which are generally synonymous with high levels of competition, Bangladeshi businessmen have to be innovative in order to out-compete co-nationals as well as non-compatriot entrepreneurs. Faced with such stiff competition, they have introduced innovations in products, sales and distribution. Through a whole range of product innovations—creating new products, offering alternative products, introducing old products at new locations and ensuring authenticity—entrepreneurs have widened the scope of their businesses and their clientele base. They have been able to attract co-national and co-regional (South Asian) clientele, as well as non-compatriot and mainstream customers. Innovations in sales and distribution have further expanded the breadth and depth of the businesses and made their businesses dissimilar and rewarding (Rahman 2018: 426).

To be clear, as mentioned, two significant problems facing Canada are economic or labor concerns as well as immigration, both of which can be potentially addressed through ethnic entrepreneurship, if it is taken seriously. Defined simply, if entrepreneurship is the act of setting up and running a business, then ethnic entrepreneurship would require an ethnic minority to manage a business. This form of entrepreneurship has been increasing for a number of reasons, not least of which is the large amount of immigration in, at least, the past five years. It is worth noting, however, that not all ethnic entrepreneurship is immigrant entrepreneurship as some ethnic business owners may have been born in Canada. Yet, their business is culturally or ethnically different from the mainstream businesses there. For the purposes of this paper, the term ethnic entrepreneurship will

be used to refer to both immigrant-run businesses as well as businesses run by ethnic minorities.

There are a number of considerations that determine why immigrants pursue entrepreneurship. Thierry Volery describes the cultural versus structural debate on ethnic entrepreneurship.

Much attention has been given to the question whether cultural or structural factors influence the business entry decision and therefore are responsible for the rise of ethnic entrepreneurship. Supporters of the culturalist approach believe that immigrant groups have culturally determined features leading to a propensity to favor self-employment (Masurel et al., 2004).

The structuralist approach, on the other hand, suggests that external factors in the host environment, such as discrimination or entry barriers in the labor market due to education and language deficits, pushes foreigners into self-employment (Volery 2007: 32).

Furthermore, in his discussion of “cultural theory,” Volery explains the belief that “[e]thnic and immigrant groups are equipped with culturally determined features such as dedication to hard work, membership of a strong ethnic community, economical living, acceptance of risk, compliance with social value patterns, solidarity and loyalty, and orientation towards self-employment” (Ibid.) He also notes that “ethnic people often become aware of the advantages their own culture might offer only after arriving in the new environment [. . .]” (Ibid.) This latter point is particularly relevant as arguments have been made that immigrants are forced into self-employment because they were not entrepreneurs in their homelands. This aspect of cultural



theory, however, shows that maybe it was not as strong an option in their former environment.

In general, Volery describes four characteristics that make an “entrepreneur.” First, he refers to a “classic entrepreneur” as one with “[s]pecific psychological characteristics, such as the need for achievement, the belief in control over one’s life, and a propensity to take risks [...]” (Ibid.: 36). A need for achievement suits ethnic minorities who come to a new country for a better life and depend on achieving some success. On the other hand, a belief in control and propensity to take risks may be lower and, therefore, set them at a disadvantage. That is where the support of the government and community can help.

Next, Volery states “[i]nformation and knowledge not available to others can motivate an individual to search for and exploit opportunities in a specific domain. Furthermore, networks and social relationships play a decisive part in gathering information and gaining access to important resources” (Ibid.) This second characteristic can be an advantage and disadvantage for ethnic entrepreneurs. Initially, ethnic entrepreneurs may rely on information from their own ethnic community. To continue to succeed, however, they will need to expand to the rest of the community.

Third, “[t]he ability to analyze an opportunity and transform it into a commercially exploitable business idea implies special skills, aptitudes, insights and circumstances, related to creative processing” (Ibid.). Ethnic entrepreneurs have proven they are just as capable of creativity and have special skills such as cooking and social aptitude to be successful (Smart 2003: 328). Lastly, “[a]n inevitable part of being an entrepreneur is the recurrent confrontation with new problems which require quick and efficient judgements and decisions” (Volery 2007: 36). This is an important element as ethnic entrepreneurs may

face certain problems that native business owners may not, such as hate crimes.

Some additional barriers ethnic entrepreneurs face are: “[t]he gathering of information, capital, training and skills, human resources, customers and suppliers, competition, and political attacks” (Ibid.: 34). In general, businesses, particularly restaurants are at risk of failing, or, by definition, closing due to many different reasons including economic, marketing and managerial issues (Parsa 2005: 305). Volery further argues that the influence of an “ethnic dimension” on entrepreneurship depends on a number of factors including “[h]ow big the cultural differences are between host and home country, the discrimination the entrepreneur is subjected to, the progression of the social integration of the concerning ethnic group, the experience gained in the new environment, age and gender, and the education level of the entrepreneur” (2007: 37). The author also refers to the “disadvantage theory” which states,

Firstly, they lack human capital such as language skills, education and experience, which prevent them from obtaining salary jobs, leaving self-employment as the only choice. Secondly, a lack of mobility due to poverty, discrimination and the limited knowledge of the local culture can lead ethnic minorities to seek self-employment. This theory sees entrepreneurship not as a sign of success but simply as an alternative to unemployment (Ibid.: 33).

Volery argues, however, this is not sufficient to explain “widespread creation of immigrant businesses” (Ibid.) Moreover, Volery explains “[p]otential lies in markets either underserved or



completely abandoned by the locals, because of insufficient returns and strenuous working conditions” (Ibid.: 34).

Overall, there are a number of reasons why immigrants pursue entrepreneurship based on labor markets, capital, appeal of self-employment, and inability to use professional experience/credentials obtained in their homelands to name a few (Williams & Krasniqi 2018: 304). Volery describes particular barriers that ethnic entrepreneurs face, including “factors such as inner-city locations, highly competitive market sectors, the absence of a ‘track record,’ language difficulties and discrimination, often comprise difficult conditions for a bank loan” (2007: 38). Capital is also a large barrier and “most ethnic entrepreneurs accumulate the bulk of their start-up capital through their own savings, some through arranged loans from relatives or within the ethnic community, whilst only a small number may acquire a bank loan” (Ibid.) Volery notes that these future entrepreneurs do not usually arrive with these savings and the only way they can usually accumulate the necessary savings is through unskilled labor that pays “[b]arely enough to survive,” and “[e]nduring long working hours, spartan living and multiple employments for a few years [. . .]” (Ibid.: 39). Moreover, as Volery warns “even the strongest community support can only help improve (but does not guarantee) the survivability of the enterprise when confronted with the harsh conditions of the market” (Ibid.: 38). Business Improvement Areas are one partial solution to assist with these issues.

Business Improvement Areas (BIA)

With 2,794,356 people, Toronto is the most populous city in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population), and one of the most multicultural in the world. This section reviews the success of five Business Improvement Areas in the city to measure the interest of the

local, native community in other new cultures. The concept of BIAs, created in Toronto in 1970, defines its districts as allowing “[l]ocal business people and commercial property owners and tenants to join together and, with the support of the municipality, to organize, finance, and carry out physical improvements and promote economic development in their district” (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing 2010: 2). Currently, some of the BIAs have clear characteristics of “ethnic enclaves.” Four BIAs were chosen for this paper as they have the ethnicity listed in their name, and are also the most well-known and frequented areas.

The concept of an ethnic enclave exists in residential areas and refers to neighborhoods that are comprised of minority groups (Vezina & Houle 2017: 9). Mireille Vézina and René Houle argue that ethnic enclaves have a “high concentration of a single ethnic group” composed “mainly of recent immigrants” that settle in these specific locations “[b]ecause of limited economic resources and the existence of affordable housing” (Ibid.) In addition, these areas provide “a certain ‘cultural comfort’ as well as “[m]utual assistance and social engagement” (Ibid.) Moreover, the authors state, “Some ethnic communities have services that are provided or tailored to the members of the community (e.g., immigrant and ethnic associations, health services, child care services, and real estate and travel services) and ethnic economies in various fields, such as construction, personal services, restaurants and food” (Ibid.) These areas are described as “[t]ransition areas in the ensuing process of spatial dispersion and social integration” (Ibid.)

Historically, in Toronto, the BIA ethnic enclaves emerged due to many Polish, Korean, Greek, Chinese, and Italian immigrants settling in the same space. Recently, these areas have expanded to welcome other cultures by having different ethnic businesses run in the same



area. For example, “Greektown” in Toronto has just as many Asian restaurants as Greek or Mediterranean ones. On the other hand, Chinatown has mostly Asian businesses although not all Chinese, but the people who frequent the neighborhood are from various ethnicities. The purpose of these neighborhoods is no longer just for connecting to similar communities in new societies (i.e., other Asian or European cultures), but with their new society as a whole, even if it is very intermixed, such as in Canada. Almost everyone eats Chinese food and it is not impossible to think that a Spanish person, for example, might eat Indian food, or a Portuguese person may eat Japanese food.

Roncesvalles

Not every BIA is labeled with an ethnic name and, therefore, it is not as easy to identify a certain ethnicity in these districts even if it is characterized by a specific group. For example, Roncesvalles, which is actually a municipality in Spain, celebrates the largest Polish festival in North America, but is not referred to as “Polandtown” or “Little Poland” explicitly. Historically, the Roncesvalles neighborhood in Toronto is where many Polish immigrants settled. The current business directory is not overwhelmingly Polish or even Eastern European, but includes a shawarma restaurant, sushi, and even a Himalayan boutique (Roncesvalles Village n.d.). However, there are “tags” attached to the businesses that state “Polish speaking” to advertise the language accommodation (Ibid.) In addition, every year there is a Polish Festival, which includes pierogi-making and polka music, with an attendance of nearly 300,000 people (Roncesvalles Polish Festival Toronto n.d.) The festival is held not only to showcase Polish businesses but all businesses in the area, and is described in an advertisement for the event as a “cultural and food experience” (Ibid.)

Korea Town

The BIA referred to as Korea Town was established as such in the 1970s when thousands of Korean immigrants chose to live and work in that area, which resulted in the ethnic enclave (Koreatown Toronto n.d.) Today, there are still many Korean businesses with Korean signage visible in the streetscape. Other ethnic food businesses are also in the business directory including other Asian cuisines such as Japanese, but also donair and a vegan pizza snack bar as well as a Korean-Mexican fusion restaurant (Koreatown Toronto Directory n.d.) The annual Dano festival has attracted 200,000 attendees since it started over 20 years ago (Koreatown Toronto n.d.) The festival is free, family-friendly and includes traditional dance and music, Taekwondo and food with the “[s]upport of major corporations, local businesses and non-profit organizations” (Ibid.)



Photograph of Korea Town taken by the Author on August 16, 2022.

Chinatown

The Chinatown BIA refers to government support on federal, provincial and municipal levels when it purports that it “[w]orks closely with all three levels of the government, area residents, community groups, other BIAs, and the private sector to build a strong Chinatown



community” (Chinatown BIA n.d.) The key purposes of the CBIA are “[t]o preserve the Chinese heritage and culture, improve on Chinatown’s streetscape, health and safety, and to create exciting community events and projects to promote the area, and draw visitors and locals to eat, shop and explore the neighborhood.” The CBIA believes that “[A]s a result, more employment opportunities and new businesses will be continually attracted to the area to enhance on the existing vibrancy and tenancy mix” (Ibid.)

Area members and residents are reported as “[d]escendants or immigrants from Asia: China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian countries (Ibid.) Many of the current restaurants are categorized as “traditional Chinese” but there is also a significant amount of “Vietnamese & Thai” and “Asian” listings as well as typical North American restaurants such as Burger King and Popeyes (Chinatown BIA: Explore n.d.) The annual Toronto Chinatown festival is free, and in 2018 there were 250,000 visitors over the two-day event (Chinatown BIA: Events n.d.). The festival’s vendors “[s]howcase Asian culture and communal diversity in Canada while improving local tourism and economy” (Ibid.) Moreover the street food offerings are described as “multicultural” and from all over Asia (Ibid.)

Greektown

This BIA is the largest Greek neighborhood in North America (Greektown on the Danforth n.d.). By the 1970s and 1980s, after decades of European immigration after the Second World War this area was considered to have the highest number of Hellenic immigrants outside of Greece (Greektown on the Danforth: History n.d.) One of the most well-known and visited BIAs, their website explains the social and economic benefits of BIAs as “an active and effective BIA benefits not

only the business community, but the surrounding neighborhood and the City as well. It serves as an economic and social anchor for the surrounding neighborhood and helps to stabilize and add vitality to the local community” (Greektown on the Danforth n.d.) The business directory lists mostly Greek businesses but there are also several other options including sushi, a French cafe, Venezuelan cuisine, shawarma and Italian (Ibid.) Moreover, “Taste of the Danforth” is the most attended ethnic festival in Toronto with over 1.5 million people participating (Ibid.)

Little Italy

Although not officially a BIA under this name until 1985, “Little Italy” is so called due to the large number of Italian immigrants who arrived in the early twentieth century (Little Italy College Street: History n.d.) Given its name and history, one might assume this is a strictly Italian neighborhood, however, a review of the business directory displays a variety of cuisines such as Middle Eastern, Thai, sushi, Indian, Izakayas, Spanish, as well as standard “North American” options (Little Italy: Directory n.d.) Every year there is a free “Taste of Little Italy” event in the district, which not only has a large focus on authentic Italian food but also has multicultural vendors (TABIA Taste of Little Italy n.d.) As with other BIAs, even with ethnic names in their title, more BIAs are embracing and showcasing multiculturalism which ensures both financial and social success.

Ethnic Enclaves

The 2015 European migrant crisis, widely known as the Syrian refugee crisis, saw large increase in the movement of refugees and migrants into Europe that year, when 1.3 million people came to the continent to request asylum, the most in a single year since the Second World War.



The Government of Canada resettled 25,000 Syrian refugees between November 2015 and February 29, 2016 (Canada's Response to the Conflict in Syria 2022). This included government-supported and privately sponsored refugees. Due to the recent immigration crisis many refugees from the Middle East have immigrated to Canada, settling in Toronto in particular. According to the 2016 Canadian census, there were 25,420 immigrants from Afghanistan, 10,830 from Syria, 13,610 from Lebanon, 74,530 from Iran, and 29,230 from Iraq (Statistics Canada 2017).

Currently, although there are not any established BIAs representing these ethnicities, there are many restaurants offering their cuisine in various BIAs,² and also many festivals especially celebrating their culture, such as the annual Taste of the Middle East (Taste of The Middle East n.d.) or Tirgan, which is a Taste of Persia event (Tirgan n.d.) As established above, BIAs are significant in helping ethnic business owners gain access to funding so it is important to ensure that businesses such as middle eastern restaurants are well connected in their communities to ensure success.

The ethnic enclave debate has centered on whether ethnic enclaves are good or bad for integration. Wu et. al. found that “the ethnic composition of the neighborhood has a nonsignificant effect—whether an immigrant lives mostly among co-ethnics or in an ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood is inconsequential for their SBC (social belonging to Canada)” (Wu et. al. 2012: 397). There is, however, a “[p]ossible protective effect of living in an ethnic enclave, as feelings

² See, Kennedy BIA: Restaurant Listings n.d. <https://www.kennedybia.com/listing-category/restaurants/>; Midtown Yonge BIA: Find a Restaurant n.d. <https://midtownyongebia.ca/find-a-business/restaurants/>; Emery Village BIA: Business Directory n.d. <https://emeryvillagebia.ca/business-directory/>

of discomfort are the lowest among immigrants living among higher concentrations of co-ethnics” (Ibid.: 403). This suggests that some discomfort is offset by being surrounded by something familiar. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully delve into the debate, in terms of the BIAs presented above, it is clear they have elements of ethnic enclaves. Yet, based on the popularity and success that these cultural events enjoy, it seems the larger community has responded positively by at least attending events and exposing themselves to different cultures. More importantly, as Alejandro Portes and Robert D. Manning note,

Enclave businesses typically start small and cater exclusively to an ethnic clientele. Their expansion and entry into the broader market requires . . . an effective mobilization of community resources. The social mechanism at work here seems to be a strong sense of reciprocity supported by collective solidarity that transcends the purely contractual character of business transactions (1986: 62).

Enclaves are significant to the restaurant business especially because, as the old adage goes, “location, location, location.” But there are some risks and downsides to opening restaurants in enclaves, not least of which is competition so it would be ideal for restaurants to be able to expand to other parts of the city. In order to do this, they need support from the wider community.

Ultimately, BIAs are an effective way to ensure a community’s culture can be properly established and maintained. Unfortunately, the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) does not seem to have special qualifications for immigration, foreigners, or people of diverse ethnic backgrounds besides support for festivals and



events that promote cultural activities (TABIA: Benefits of TABIA Membership n.d.) These events are generally free and family-friendly, which is particularly important as exposing children to diversity early “[c]an improve intergroup attitudes [. . .]” and “[t]he development of cross-group friendships [. . .] may be particularly important in encouraging intergroup tolerance” (Cameron & Turner 2010: 336). However, if TABIA treats ethnic businesses as every other business and does not acknowledge their unique needs, which may include funding, then it may lessen the chance of success for these particular enterprises. Moreover, a report by the Global Diversity Exchange explains,

Access to educational programs, mentorship programs, settlement services, and business entrepreneurship programs is identified as essential for immigrants, and having one access point for all services can ease gaps in knowledge and access of available support. Connecting immigrant-oriented services with the greater community can assist in integration and also in the development of businesses through networking opportunities (Sim 2015: 2).

The next section looks at how the media portrays ethnic businesses, and if they acknowledge the issues described above.

Media Response

Critical theories of media and communication explain the significant impact of media portrayals on the public and government. The media impact is particularly poignant when it comes to portrayals of migration especially during a global crisis. For example, Haynes et. al argue that mass media influences “[c]ommon knowledge and popular

beliefs” on issues such as “[t]he numbers and nationalities of those entering a country as well as their reasons for migration” and “[w]elfare entitlements of asylum seekers and people’s perceptions about the relative ease with which diverse groups integrate” (Haynes et. al. 2009: 1).

To this end, it is important to examine how ethnic businesses are portrayed in the media. More specifically, this study considered the following specific questions: Does the media portray ethnic food businesses as success stories or victims of racism, vandalism and hate crimes? Do these portrayals vary based on whether they were published in news sources at the national level or the local (Toronto) level? And, which section of the newspaper were these stories published in?

This study covers the 2010–2019 time period, the years shortly before and after the 2015 refugee crisis. The author searched for articles using the keywords “immigrant,” “ethnic business,” “refugees,” “restaurant,” and “entrepreneur” on the newspapers’ websites. The search yielded titles containing those keywords, however the articles included in the study are not an exhaustive list of all the articles that portray ethnic cuisine, but a selected sample based on relevancy. The focus is on the quality of the article and that is determined by which section it appears in. Moreover, due to limitation of the length of this study, only two or three articles per major newspaper were included. The goal was to evaluate how the media portrayed the stories of ethnic food businesses and, therefore, how the general public might respond.

The global migration crisis began in 2015, and the newspapers endorsed different political parties for the federal elections that year. The two national newspapers studied are considered politically conservative as they endorsed the Conservative Party during the 2015 federal elections (*National Post* 2015; *The Globe and Mail* 2015). Although conservatism has historically been opposed to multiculturalism, more



recently, however, the Conservative Party in Canada has taken on a more “[s]ubtle restrictiveness in citizenship and refugee policy [. . .]” (Marwah 2013: 96). This is evident in the national newspapers’ portrayal of ethnic businesses in a generally positive manner. One local newspaper used in this study, the *Toronto Star*, endorsed the Liberal Party in the 2015 elections (*Toronto Star* 2015). Generally speaking, liberalism in Canada includes support for minority rights and multiculturalism (Fierlbeck 2006: 141). Even though the national newspapers endorsed the Conservative Party in the 2015 federal election and the *Toronto Star* endorsed the Liberal Party, their portrayals of ethnic businesses were fairly similar, at least in terms of content. There were some differences in the sections the articles appeared in, and in the wording of headlines. The next section describes how the three newspapers portrayed the ethnic food businesses.

Toronto/Local Newspapers

Toronto Star

According to their Media Kit, *Toronto Star* is Canada’s largest local daily newspaper with readership in Toronto representing over 30 percent of Toronto’s population (*Toronto Star* Media Kit 2019: 2). The articles studied ranged from the “Local” section to “Marketing & Sales,” and “Canada.” The three articles chosen are from 2012, 2013, and 2019 and all referred to the potential of ethnic entrepreneurship.

To begin with, an article written by an immigration reporter in May 2019 in the local news section, reported on an opportunity for refugee entrepreneurs to pitch their business ideas to investors (Keung 2019). The article states, “While many newcomers are adventurous and full of entrepreneurial spirit, they lack the know-how to present their business plans and most importantly, access to prospective investors for funding and partnerships” (Ibid.) The reporter interviewed the

managing director and founder of “Jumpstart,” which was created in 2016 to “[h]elp Syrian newcomers launch their careers and find meaningful employment in Canada” (Ibid.) He commented, “There are a lot of programs out there for immigrant entrepreneurs, but we keep hearing from refugees on the ground that they want more than training and need the opportunity to connect with investors to sell the ideas they have” (Ibid.) The reporter explained that the pilot program had over seventy applications and many were experienced entrepreneurs back home (Ibid.) As mentioned above in this paper, capital is difficult for most entrepreneurs to obtain, but this is particularly true for ethnic entrepreneurs. According to the article, the businesses that applied for this program required capital ranging from C\$100,000 to C\$2.4 million (Ibid.) The article also makes a comparison between “refugee entrepreneurs” and other “Canadian entrepreneurs,” and references the president and executive director of Angel Investors Ontario who says he saw little difference between refugee entrepreneurs and their Canadian counterparts in terms of their innovations and creativity (Ibid.) This is an important remark as it supports the notion that ethnic entrepreneurs can be innovative and creative which is essential to successful business. The article, moreover, notes that these refugee entrepreneurs are not only creating jobs for themselves but “[i]f their ideas take off, they are going to employ others, contribute to our economy and become business leaders” (Ibid.) The article recognized that it is necessary to acknowledge the potential of ethnic businesses to help the economy.

Next, an article from the beginning of 2013 in the general “Canada” section by an immigration reporter focused on how Canada was seeking to give immigrant entrepreneurs permanent residency through a Start-up Visa, whereas competing states such as the United States and Australia only offered temporary residence (Keung 2013).



The goal was “[t]o link immigrant entrepreneurs with private sector organizations in Canada that offer support and resources for their ideas.” (Ibid.) In addition, “candidates must be sponsored by Canadian investors” (Ibid.) The article mentions that the conditional residency applies to mall kiosks, convenience stores, and small businesses (Ibid.) It is not clear if “small businesses” would include restaurants but if it does then immigrants may start considering running a food business before they arrive, and begin pre-planning rather than arriving with a different career in mind and then deciding to run a restaurant and having to learn how to do so in a short amount of time. The Start-Up Visa program vaguely states that having a qualifying business makes one eligible for a Start-Up Visa but nowhere does it explicitly specify that a restaurant business qualifies immigrants for a Start-Up Visa. More study would have to be done to address whether restaurants are actually being considered for the Start-up Visa option, and whether it makes a difference in immigrants’ decision to choose entrepreneurship in the food industry.

Lastly, an article from 2012, entitled, “How Local Entrepreneurs Can Benefit from an International View” actually appeared in the Market & Sales section (*Toronto Star*2012). It quotes a Manager of Policy and Research who had done “[e]xtensive research on the mindset of immigrant entrepreneurs in Canada,” arguing “they’re naturally risk takers and have a sense of entrepreneurial spirit, I think that lends itself to being creative” (Ibid). Again, this is the positive reinforcement needed to dispel the myth that ethnic entrepreneurs will not be as creative as local business owners.

National Newspapers

National Post

According to News Media Canada, a national association of the Canadian news media industry, the *National Post* had 186,343 weekday readers in 2015 (Newspapers Canada 2016). Three relevant articles from 2011, 2016, and 2017 were found in the “Life” section as well as general “News” and “World/News.” All three articles refer to the government’s policies and views on ethnic entrepreneurship.

First, an article from the beginning of 2017 entitled, “How Mythologizing the Immigrant Chef Dehumanizes the Immigrant Experience,” appeared in the Life: Eating & Drinking section and argues it is dehumanizing to reduce the immigrant experience to assimilation and providing North Americans with a new dining experience (McNeilly 2017). The author points out that these notions will discourage marginalized people from sharing their stories of traditions and togetherness. The author argues that people open a business to survive, but that does not mean that their contribution cannot become more meaningful. It is important, however, to acknowledge this cannot happen if people merely continue to eat ethnic food, claim they are tolerant of diversity, but then do not support immigration overall. The reporter acknowledges that more recently a desire to taste traditional foods has increased, especially in terms of spice, but the reporter believes that accepting foods outside what may be considered standard Canadian cuisine does not make one more tolerant of others (Ibid). This is an important point as more research, including this study, looks into the role ethnic entrepreneurship plays in the integration of new cultures. Although this study largely aims to examine how, and the extent to which, ethnic entrepreneurship may generate tolerance or reduce barriers, it by no means argues that it should be necessary for entrepreneurs to be accepted only on this basis.



This newspaper article details the very important fact that, along with an interest in a different cuisine, people must also acknowledge, celebrate, and give credit to immigrants' contribution to the economy (Ibid.) For example, the article quotes a statistic from Bloomberg News stating, “[h]ummus sales were largely responsible for fuelling American multinational food company PepsiCo’s growth in 2016. At the same time, to emphasize this point, the article mentions that the United States elected a president who promised to ban Muslims from the country” (Ibid.) The article also notes, “When opening restaurants in North America, [immigrants are] choosing to sell what will allow them to support their families instead of what will tell the best story of tradition and togetherness” (Ibid.) Moreover, they mention that instead of hiring those of the same ethnicity as the cuisine being offered, the owners “[h]ired white people specifically for the purpose of having them work front of house because he didn’t want anyone to question the legitimacy—or the price point—of the North American fare he had chosen to serve” (Ibid.) This is problematic for a number of reasons as it should not be necessary to take such considerations into hiring. People should be hired to work because of their interest and need for the job. Such practices should be addressed especially if it is happening on a large scale.

Another article from 2011 in the general “News” section mentions an immigrant from the Philippines who became a bakery owner in the Greater Toronto Area. She states that the Canadian government’s expectation of a C\$400,000 net worth and C\$200,000 to invest was very difficult to achieve for newcomers (Csanady 2011). The bakery owner discusses how most business owners start their business with C\$20,000–C\$30,000, but she was able to start with C\$11,000 and had enjoyed enough success to plan on opening two more locations in other cities in Ontario (Ibid.) To get to that point she enrolled in a

program offered by employment insurance that taught her how to run a small business (Ibid.) Once she completed the program, her friends were inspired to invest in her after tasting her baking and she declares it was their help not the government's financial funding that allowed her to start her business (Ibid.) The article ends by stating, "[Her] success is testament to the fact no matter how big their investment, immigrant entrepreneurs bring ideas, capital, enthusiasm and, perhaps most importantly, people to the Canadian economy" (Ibid). This story is another example of the media supporting and promoting the values of ethnic entrepreneurship. It also sheds some light on a lack of government support and how community efforts enabled the entrepreneur's success.

Lastly, an article from March 2016 entitled, "Liberals Plan for Huge Influx of Refugees, Immigrant Spouses at Expense of Skilled Foreign Workers," appeared in the "World/News" section. It describes the plan to put a "temporary pause" on the acceptance of permanent economic migrants to better accommodate the growing number of refugees from other parts of the world (Berthiaume 2016). This is a very important issue that is, unfortunately, not properly addressed in the newspaper article as it implies that refugees and immigrant spouses are not skilled. Even those who defend accepting refugees and asylum-seekers on grounds of "compassion" overlook the fact that refugees are capable and skilled. The newspaper article should include the fact that individuals arriving will likely contribute to the economy more so than burden it.

Globe and Mail

The *Globe and Mail*, a newspaper serving five major cities in Western and Central Canada, had 323,133 copies of the newspaper in circulation during weekdays in 2015, according to *News Media Canada* (Newspapers



Canada 2016). Four relevant articles from 2016 to 2018 are discussed below, most of them from the “Food” section of this newspaper. All the articles showcase specific people and share their personal stories and experience. They explain what inspired them to open their businesses, reasons which vary from wanting to give back to the community, to not being satisfied with the quality of ethnic food available. Importantly, they frequently mention using local products, which would satisfy people’s desire to support local Canadian businesses and improve the economy.

An article from the end of 2018 titled, “I’m An Immigrant Who Went from Being Hungry to Feeding the Hungry,” is “part of ‘Living Generously,’ a *Globe and Mail* series, in partnership with Sun Life, focusing on Canadians who are giving back to their communities and making a difference in people’s lives” (Glauser 2018). It showcases a male from Israel who arrived at the age of twenty-three with little money and little English language skills (Ibid.) The article describes the struggle with language as well as survival as he had little access to food (Ibid.) The article is entirely a transcript of his journey in his own words with no added commentary from the reporter. He tells how he started a business that allows chefs to rent a kitchen if they could not afford to start their own business (Ibid.) In addition, he states, “My ultimate dream is to run a soup kitchen that delivers hot meals to people in need” (Ibid). This is a positive account of how someone overcame language and financial barriers to become successful. It also demonstrates that sometimes immigrants are also concerned with giving back to their communities and are not just focused on their own personal success.

An article from July 2017 in the “Food” section of the newspaper describes the significance of food in Syrian culture and how newcomers in general from different backgrounds have historically contributed to a

Canadian food identity (Davidson 2017). One of the Syrian refugee subjects of the article begins preparing “elaborate thank-you meals” for their sponsors, featuring traditional food from Aleppo (Ibid.) The sponsors suggest the refugees open a restaurant, however, “It was a daunting idea for the pair, who had operated small businesses before, but had no knowledge of the restaurant industry. But the appeal of sharing Syrian culture quickly [helped to] overcome the fear of the unknown” (Ibid.) This is an important discovery: that they had previous experience in business. The interviewee explains that anyone can find every Syrian ingredient needed in the city “[a]s long as he knows where to look” (Ibid.) When someone had stopped to look at the menu, the Syrian owner told them about Syrian cuisine, “[a]bout the rich culinary history of Aleppo and about his family’s journey to Canada” (Ibid.) It is significant that these interactions were happening, demonstrating that ethnic businesses have the potential to provide immigrants with the opportunity to teach others about their cultures. The owner specifies that he “[w]ants people to know about the Syrian sense of humor and hear Syrian music” (Ibid.) This is an important comment because, besides food, another culturally relevant way for people to bond is through comedy and music. At ethnic restaurants specifically, diners may be exposed to different cultures if ethnic music is being played, and/or by engaging in conversation with other diners and employees of the restaurant where jokes are told to put people at ease and to ensure they enjoy their time at the restaurant. This is a special consideration for business owners who seek to build rapport with customers to ensure that they return.

Ultimately, the owner declares that he wants perceptions of Syria “[t]o shift from war and heartache to an understanding of Aleppo’s richly spiced foods, of the Syrian love of hospitality and the warm, smiling demeanors of the Syrian people” (Ibid.) The article



mentions that the owner describes himself as “[a] strong believer in community,” and had “[c]ooked welcome dinners for Syrian newcomers and catered events for groups of up to 250 people” (Ibid.) The owner states, “I love this idea that refugees cook for other refugees. We love to give back” (Ibid.) The owner’s future goals include opening another location and starting a supper club “[w]here people can come to his home and get a taste of family-style Syrian cooking” (Ibid.) The interviewee voices his desire for a collective Syrian neighborhood, perhaps similar to a Chinatown or Little Italy described earlier. He states, “I don’t like to be separate. If we are together, we are strong” (Ibid.) Again, even though it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine whether ethnic enclaves are appropriate or not, it is worth noting that this ethnic entrepreneur supports the concept.

A Syrian general manager of another restaurant, interviewed in the same article, had hired Syrian refugees as contractors, kitchen staff, and front of house (Ibid.). The restaurant decor features photos and drawings from Syrian arts, which are for sale at a profit for the artist. The manager wants customers to be mindful of the “situation back home,” as she refers to Syria’s ongoing civil war, but she also “[h]opes the restaurant will allow people to see the country through a lens that is not only uplifting, but hopeful” (Ibid.). She states, “We feel like this place is an opportunity to showcase the Syrian culture and traditions and the food” (Ibid.) The manager admits that their inspiration for opening a restaurant was due to the fact that they were not satisfied with the quality of Middle Eastern food being offered in the city (Ibid.) This touches on the wider debate of why ethnic entrepreneurs get into the restaurant business. Even though their original motivation was not necessarily to connect to the wider community, it is possible that social linkages would occur in the future.

This is particularly true as the restaurant uses Syrian ingredients combined with modern food trends and vegan options (Ibid.)

The reporter also interviewed a board member at Culinary Historians of Canada who describes sharing a culture's food as "[t]he easiest way to gain a footing in any society, to share that very human experience. It's the grand equalizer. Everybody eats" (Ibid.) The reporter interviewed a University of Toronto professor specializing in the history of immigration to Canada, who argues, "The eager acceptance of different foods is still a relatively new phenomenon in Canada," and "[r]estaurants opened by immigrant groups would often receive pushback from both the area they operated in and from Canadian authorities" (Ibid.) Moreover, the professor explains how people have tried to change and transform food customs by Canadianizing them (Ibid.) It seems this trend is changing as people have not only started to open up to new foods, but are eagerly consuming fusion cuisines. In other words, instead of trying to make immigrants eat "Canadian" food, people are working together to improve cuisines and make them appealing for everyone.

Like the *National Post*, an article appearing in the *Globe and Mail* also reported a negative side to different cultures coming together. An article from April 2018 reported on how a Chinese restaurant was ordered by The Ontario Human Rights Tribunal to pay a black customer C\$10,000 after they were told to prepay for their meal (Bascaramurty 2018). The adjudicator concluded that restaurant staff "[h]ad violated Section 1 of the province's human-rights code—which guarantees equal treatment when accessing goods, services and facilities" (Ibid.) The restaurant submitted a response to the tribunal through a lawyer explaining that the restaurant "attracts something of a transient crowd," and "[d]ine and dashes were common, so they adopted a policy requiring customers whom staff did not recognize as regulars to prepay



for their food” (Ibid.) The customer’s experience had made him question the popular narrative that big cities like Toronto were harmonious multicultural havens. He states, “I feel a lot of Canadians feel like because [. . .] they like to eat Jamaican food and know about roti and doubles they think they’re not racist” (Ibid.) As mentioned previously, simply consuming ethnic food does not guarantee one will not express racism or hatred toward another ethnic group, and supporting ethnic businesses is also not sufficient to claim to be “not racist.” It is also evident from this case that not only are “white” Canadians initiating racism, but when other cultures clash there is potential for stereotyping as well.

Lastly, an article in the “Food & Wine” section from June 2016 depicts the experience of a national food reporter driving “[a]cross the country to uncover the immigrant history—and vibrant present—of small-town Chinese-Canadian food” (Hui). The reporter comments on the invention of dishes like Alberta ginger beef and Thunder Bay Bon Bon ribs, and argues they are “uniquely Canadian” (Ibid.) The reporter interviewed a York university professor who argues that Chinese restaurants “[s]erve many purposes [. . .] create jobs and opportunities for newcomers and they fill a void for the entire community, often providing services and infrastructure that don’t otherwise exist. For a century and a half, they have been quintessential small-town Canadian institutions” (Ibid.) It is an interesting article that explains how Chinese restaurants exist and survive in even the smallest of Canadian towns. The reporter specifically inquired about the owners’ reasons for opening a business and concludes “[t]heir motivation for coming here—and for immigrants from all over the world since—is often still the same: a promise of a better future for the next generation” (Ibid.) One of the owners she had interviewed states, “The restaurants are just

the vehicles. It's all about the families" (Ibid.) Valuing family is universal and surely something Canadians can relate to and respect.

The reporter describes the historical Chinese Immigration Act (1923-1947) that stopped Chinese immigration and how "legalized discrimination set the tone for anti-Chinese sentiments across the country—including in cities like Vancouver and Toronto, where Chinese restaurant owners were subject to police harassment, as well as violence and vandalism" (Ibid.) Though the act was repealed in 1947, immigration restrictions on Chinese on the basis of race and origin were not removed till 1967.

It is, therefore, important for policymakers to consider the potential implications of their legislation. More recently, relations have improved, and one restaurant owner in a small town states it was easier to adapt to than a big city, for example, "regulars would offer English lessons and other help to his parents" (Ibid.) This owner, who is also the mayor of the community he grew up in in Canada, remarks, "Things like that couldn't happen in China, right?" (Ibid.) In this sense, not only has the community embraced him but he acknowledges and appreciates his new community, and compares it to his homeland where he believes he would not even be able to achieve the same level of success.

Another chef interviewed in the article, a trained chef who had worked in some of the biggest restaurants around Beijing, declares that compared to the food he was trained to cook, this version of Chinese food is much simpler to make (Ibid.) He explains that he had tried a few times to cook here the way he had cooked back home, but "the people here didn't really like it" (Ibid.) In this sense, there is some adaptation and not an entirely authentic experience.

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to assess how ethnic entrepreneurs have become part of their community through their



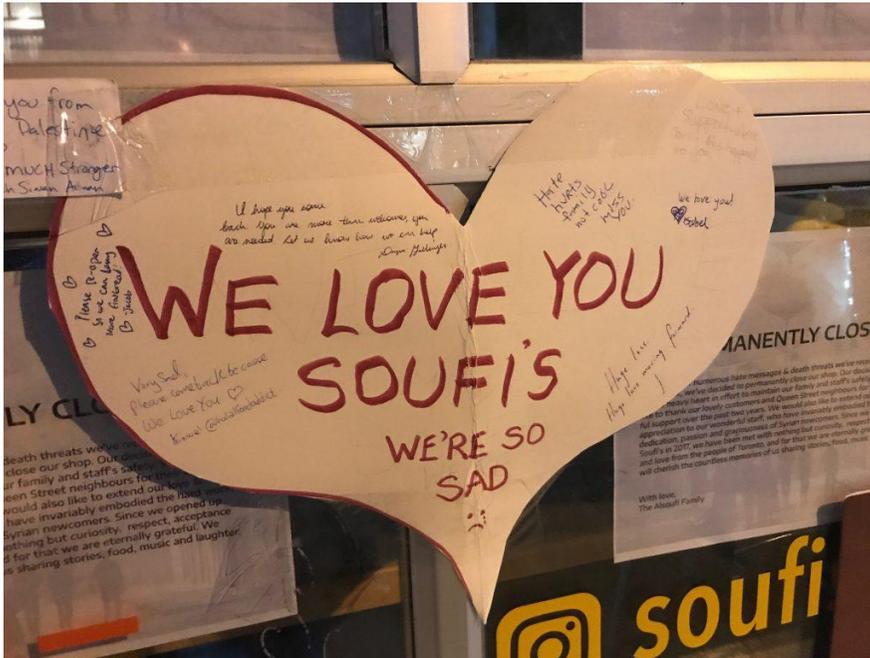
business as well as how the community has reacted to their business based on depictions in the media. To achieve this, the next section employs a specific case study on the sudden closure of a Syrian restaurant in Toronto due to hate messages and death threats.

Case Study: *Soufi's*

In early 2017, a Syrian refugee family opened a restaurant named *Soufi's* on Queen Street West in Toronto. The restaurant, owned by refugees who were under private sponsorship, enjoyed a lot of initial success, but they decided to “permanently” close suddenly in early October 2019 after receiving death threats by phone and hate messages online from around the world at the end of September 2019 after the restaurant owners’ son was publicly outed for participating in a protest outside of a People’s Party of Canada event in Hamilton, Ontario held on September 29, 2019. The messages and threats accused the son of participating in an antifa rally and allegedly physically blocking an eighty-one-year-old woman from moving forward to attend the controversial event (McQuigge 2019). The son of the restaurant owners appeared in a video showing the interaction and he was arrested for this alleged interaction. After the son was allegedly physically assaulted due to his involvement at the protest, the owners decided to close the restaurant.

This section examines how the same major Canadian newspapers utilized in the previous section portrayed the closing of the restaurant. The *Toronto Star* published at least eight articles on the restaurant closure between October 8 and December 3, 2019 most appearing in the “GTA” section (the Greater Toronto Area). There were also two follow-up articles in December about the arrest of the son for his involvement in the protests including the assaults (Clarke 2019; Loriggio 2019). The *National Post* published at least six articles, and the *Globe and Mail*

seven, on the topic during the same time period. All three newspapers reported on the closure and reopening, as well as a follow-up at the end of October on the arrest of the son. There were no reports of additional death threats after the arrest was made.



Source: News Staff and The Canadian Press. “Police investigating after Syrian restaurant closed due to ‘hate messages.’” *City News*, October 9, 2019.

<https://toronto.citynews.ca/2019/10/09/police-investigating-after-syrian-restaurant-closed-due-to-hate-messages/>.

Globe and Mail

The first article published in this newspaper was the only one to mention the federal election that was scheduled for the same month of the incident (Bascaramurty 2019). The article published on October 8, 2019 includes a statement by the restaurant owner on the incident itself stating, “Our family and business do not condone acts of hate, violence, or harassment in any shape or form and advocate for peace, equality and free speech for all human beings” (Ibid.) The reporter states that his attempts to reach the family for a further statement



were unsuccessful (Ibid.) The article focuses more on the son of the elderly woman in the video. He himself commented on the death threats towards the restaurant as “a disgrace to Canada,” demonstrating his support for the son of the Syrian refugees. He added, “We live in a just society. We don’t need vigilantes” (Ibid.) The article ends with his reflection on the incident, “I’m really worried for Canada and this polarization effect on both sides” (Ibid.)

A second article, an opinion piece, published on October 9, 2019, linked the incident to politics more broadly. Entitled, “The Story of Toronto’s Syrian Restaurant Soufi’s Shows What Can Happen When Our Politics Get Overheated,” begins with a strong statement on immigration, “The safe arrival of several thousand migrants from war-stricken Syria is one of the better chapters in Toronto’s recent history. Most Torontonians welcomed them warmly. Many formed sponsorship groups, volunteering their time to help the newcomers find jobs, homes, schools and doctors” (Gee 2019). The reporter describes the closure of *Soufi’s* as “distressing,” characterizing the business as “[a] gift to the city. Like so many arrivals from so many places, they embraced their new home and made it better” (Ibid.)

An article by Michelle McQuigge entitled, “Owners of Syrian Restaurant File Complaint with Toronto Police After Hate Messages Force Closure,” published in October 9th, 2019, reports on a constable stating after meeting with the restaurant owners that an investigation was launched, however they did not disclose details of the allegations contained in the police report (2019). The article states that the restaurant “[had] earned a reputation as both a local hot spot and a success story tied to the influx of Syrian refugees that have arrived in Canada in recent years” (Ibid.) The article carries a positive message from the Mayor of Toronto, John Tory, who stated that he was “heartbroken” over the Al-Soufi family’s ordeal and “[He] sincerely

hope[s] the family will reconsider and reopen the restaurant because we support them, we will continue to support them, and the best way to fight this kind of hate is to support them and their business” (Ibid.) This is the only article in this newspaper to include the mayor’s statement and support for the business. It is significant that a politician commented on the issue but the reason the business was closed needs to be addressed and effectively dealt with by acknowledging that ethnic businesses face these additional challenges such as hatred and death threats.

An opinion piece entitled, “A Syrian Restaurant’s Struggles Showcase Canada’s Double Standards,” published on October 10, 2019 describes the family as a quintessential Canadian success story unlike other articles that referred to them as a refugee success story (Silim 2019). The article comments on how the restaurant hired many refugees, which the local community believed was a “testament to Canada’s embrace of immigration and multiculturalism” (Ibid.) The article directly addresses negative perceptions of immigrants in general, stating “[r]hetoric against refugees and immigrants is premised on the false belief that they are expensive drains on society, rather than productive citizens. They are burdened with the need to prove their humanity and economic worth in their host country” (2019). This is a particularly important problem that needs to be addressed for ethnic businesses to be taken seriously. The writer argues, “The Al-Soufis didn’t just meet this unfair standard—they exceeded it. Through their family-run business, they contributed their history, culture and entrepreneurial spirit, while creating a space for Syrian refugees to make a living in their new country” (Ibid.) The writer explains, “As a food journalist, I have seen immigrants use food as a safe harbor. Food is a language that bridges the gap between them and their host countries, and they open restaurants to showcase their



culture in ways that reassure society that they are here to serve the community and be industrious in apolitical ways” (Ibid.) In this statement the writer makes a specific claim that ethnic businesses do not just open for survivability but as a way to integrate into the community.

Another article published on October 10, 2019 in the “Toronto” section, includes some of the details of the death threats against the family (Bascaramurty 2019). It also includes a fuller quote of the statement from the elderly woman’s son that was reported in a previous article, in which he states, “Anybody that would ever threaten that poor gentleman [the elder Mr. Al-Soufi] is a disgrace to Canada” (Ibid.) In this statement the elderly woman’s son is expressing support for the restaurant owner, whose own son is accused of harassing the elderly woman at the protest. Sharing this side of the story is necessary to demonstrate that people should not be treated to an unfair standard simply because they are of a different ethnicity.

The reopening of the restaurant received wide media coverage as well. A *Canadian Press* reporter, Nicole Thompson’s article on the Syrian incident was published in the *Globe and Mail* and in the *National Post* on the same day. It appeared in the *Globe and Mail* as “Syrian Restaurant Soufi’s Reopens in Toronto Days After Closing Due to Hate Messages” (2019). In the *National Post* it was more vaguely titled, “Toronto Syrian Restaurant That Closed Due to Threats Reopens” (Ibid.) The content of both articles is identical, only the titles are different. It is worth noting that the *Globe and Mail* mentions the actual name of the restaurant rather than simply “Toronto Syrian restaurant,” and uses the term “hate messages” instead of “due to threats.” The article begins with a statement containing such language as “flood of threats” and “outpouring of support” (Ibid.) The author also credits the reopening to “messages of support and media

attention,” and describes the restaurant as “popular” and “hailed internationally as a refugee success story” (Ibid.). The reporter interviewed one of the customers who stated, “We’re here of course for the delicious food. . . And to support the business” (Ibid.). She said she’s a “[r]egular of the Syrian restaurant, coming with her family every other Sunday to grab some flatbread for lunch” (Ibid.) One reason for this is that the customer’s grandmother is Syrian “[s]o she feels a special kinship with the place” (Ibid.). This touches on the debate about whether the customers of ethnic businesses visit the restaurant because they relate to the ethnicity, or enjoy the food, or want to support a local business. In this case it seems to be a mixture of all those reasons.

Near the end of October, the *Globe and Mail* ran an article entitled, “Son of Soufi’s Owners Charged in Protest of People’s Party event,” detailing that the arrest was made on two counts of intimidation, two counts of disguise with intent, and one count of causing a disturbance (Hoard 2019). The article reports that the elderly woman’s son had reversed his statement. The article mentions that the son of the elderly woman, who appeared in the original video posted on the internet that prompted death threats from some viewers, was pleased with the arrest even though he previously spoke against hate and threats targeted towards the restaurant owner’s son and the restaurant (Ibid.) The elderly woman’s son stated that his mother should not have been prevented from attending the speech at the People’s Party event (Ibid.) There was no further information on whether the news of the charges being laid prompted any further messages or threats to the restaurant or its staff.



Source: N. Manzocco, “Soufi’s to Reopen: “We do not wish to set a tragic example,” *Now Toronto*, October 10, 2019.
<https://nowtoronto.com/food-and-drink/food/soufis-reopening-toronto>.

National Post

The first article on the business closure was published in this newspaper on October 8, 2019, detailing the restaurant’s decision to close for safety reasons after they received death threats when a “family member” was discovered to be attending a protest (McQuigge). In the next paragraph, the report states that it was, in fact, the son who had attended the protest (Ibid.) It also states, “Toronto police say a member of the restaurant’s staff had previously reached out about filing a criminal complaint, but no such report was ever completed” (Ibid.) The constable told the newspaper that the police wanted to reconnect to make sure the report was filed because “when these things live in the dark, we can’t shine any light on them” (Ibid.) It is significant that the police were taking this incident seriously and encouraging the Syrian victims to report the matter.

The *National Post* carried an article the next day, October 9, 2019—the exact same article by Michelle McQuigge that had appeared in the *Globe and Mail* (please see above section) with a slightly different headline, “Syrian Restaurant Owners Filing Complaint About Hate Messages, Toronto Cops Say” (2019). McQuigge works for the *Canadian Press* and not for either newspaper exclusively. It is worth noting that this article’s headline is presented as a statement by the police and does not mention that the hate messages forced closure of the restaurant, even if it was temporary.

Another article published on October 10, 2019 entitled, “‘We do not wish to set a tragic example’: Toronto Syrian restaurant to reopen in face of threats,” mentions how the hate, harassment, and threats “[f]orce[d] a family of restaurant owners to abandon their business in fear. But then it would also inspire massive goodwill [. . .]” (Brean 2019). This article cites a response by the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, stating, “Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted the image of the closure letter, saying: ‘Hatred and threats of violence have no place in Canada. We are always stronger together than when we’re divided.’” (Ibid.) For this issue to have the attention of the head of government is notable. There was, however, no mention of a larger issue with ethnic businesses being targeted by hate crimes. According to the article, Mohamad Fakhri, chief executive of the Paramount Middle Eastern Kitchen chain, told a press conference that he intervened to help the owners because he “[u]nderstands the pain of intimidation, and he believes that if Canadians give in to hatred, ‘we will lose ourselves’ [. . .] I wanted them to feel that they are not alone in this” (Ibid.) Fakhri also argued, “[p]eople who come to Canada to open a business and contribute to the economy should never be treated this way” (Ibid.) Lastly, Fakhri made a plea, “Toronto, I’m begging you, please let’s support this family,” and, “The success of Soufi’s will be a



reflection of how welcoming we are as a society” (Ibid.) The support that the restaurant received after the initial news reports is important especially at the community and societal level. No further action was taken, however, to open a wider discussion on how ethnic businesses need more protection from these incidents.

Near the end of October, the *National Post* ran an article entitled, “Son of Soufi's Restaurant Owner is One of Three Charged Over Protest Outside PPC Event in Hamilton” (Loriggio 2019). The article details how police reviewed footage from social media and identified perpetrators and victims accordingly. The article explains how the suspects’ involvement in the protest had previously led to death threats against the family and restaurant staff for the son’s participation. It ends with a note on the ongoing police investigation of the death threats.

Lastly, the headline of a *Canadian Press* article appearing in the *National Post* at the beginning of December does not refer directly to *Soufi’s*, but it mentions the son as one of those arrested for assault and theft after more witnesses came forward and video footage was reviewed (The *Canadian Press* 2019). The article ends on a complaint submitted over the death threats and that the matter remained under investigation. These last two articles reported the follow-up in such a way that the police were investigating all aspects of the case, but still taking the death threats and hate messages against the restaurant seriously.

Toronto Star

The first article in this newspaper to report on the restaurant’s closure quotes an interviewee referring to the closure as a “loss to the community” (Keung and Zlomislic 2019). It cites a customer expressing outrage that this was happening in Canada, stating, “This is horrifying

and appalling. This is not Canada. There are rules of law. There are procedures to deal with situations like this” (Ibid.) While this comment concerns a wider discussion on the responsibility of police, the next article discusses how the police had launched an investigation.

The second article reports that detectives in the criminal investigation bureau and the city’s intelligence hate crime section were assigned (Zlomislic 2019). The article explains that most threats came from the United States or “abroad,” and the owners released a statement stating they believed it did not reflect Torontonians’ views (Ibid.) One of the constables interviewed stated they took the death threats very seriously and were grateful the family had reported it (Ibid.) This article is the only one to mention that police had distributed flyers throughout the neighborhood to encourage business owners and patrons to report hate crimes (Ibid.) The article describes the restaurant as a business that was celebrated locally and internationally not just for its food but as evidence of the success of Canada’s refugee resettlement program after its inception in 2017 (Ibid.)

Another article by a race and gender columnist reports on the issue of white supremacy with this case as a reference (Paradkar 2019). The columnist describes white supremacists as “self-appointed guardians of a self-constructed race fighting a mythical threat” in her article about how the incident with *Soufi’s* is part of a larger, growing issue (Ibid.) It also relates the challenges to other victims of hate such as members of the LGBTQ community, which are also mentioned in the article.

A *Toronto Star* editorial discussing the business closure describes the incident as “terrible” in the sense that the owners were victims of hate and threats, and were forced to close their restaurant for safety reasons, but also “wonderful” as they received much support and solidarity (Star Editorial Board 2019). The article celebrates the



restaurant as “[a] very visible success story among the thousands of Syrian refugees who came to Canada since 2015,” and dwells on the wider implications of the business closing for the reason it did, declaring, “If it was driven out of business by sheer hate, that would cast a long shadow over the whole project” (Ibid.) The article includes a statement by the owners stating that since they opened in 2017 “[w]e have been met with nothing but curiosity, respect, acceptance, and love from the people of Toronto” (Ibid.) The article argues that people are too “fixated on the right-wing trolls and haters” and, therefore, “[t]hey miss the big picture—the fact that their noxious message is overwhelmingly rejected, both in word and deed. Soufi’s was embraced by the whole community before it came under attack, and there’s every reason to believe it will be embraced again, even more so” (Ibid.) As hopeful and positive as this message is intended to be, it is also necessary to be concerned about the threats as it would be regrettable if they were not taken seriously and something did occur. The message of the article is to not lose faith in Canada, and what it stands for, but instead to be, “Unlike those who seize on every incident of racism or violence as a sign that Canada is irredeemably unjust” (Ibid.) It is a different narrative and ultimately an opinion piece.

Another opinion piece appearing in the *Toronto Star* in October 11th, 2019 entitled, “Soufi’s Reopening Shows We Must Not Become Silent Witnesses to Hate,” echoes a similar sentiment (Fakih 2019). The author writes, “We must never allow ourselves to become silent witnesses to hate [. . .] Whether it’s at the ballot box or in the workplace, on the street or online, we must stand up and speak out against those who want to divide us. We must take clear and decisive action and proclaim to the intolerant among us that they will never win. Hate will never win.” (Ibid.) The message of not remaining silent is significant as immigrants do not always have a voice.

In another opinion piece, the author expresses the view that, at first, she thought that the owners gave up too easily when they decided to close the business (Jalaluddin 2019). Then the author explains how her “[i]nitial unsympathetic reaction [was] swiftly followed by a realization about the burden of representation among racialized communities in Canada (Ibid.)” She comments, “Marginalized communities—in particular people of color and visible minorities—have long been expected to simply ‘put up’ with everyday hatred, to shoulder the burden of harassment and targeted attacks as a natural cost of speaking out, sharing our truth and our perspective” (Ibid.) She also mentions the important point that “especially considering that the Al-Soufi family arrived in Canada from war-torn Syria, a country where death threats are not simply ugly words; they are followed by middle-of-the-night kidnappings, jail, torture, death. Perhaps shuttering one’s business seemed like the only sensible option at the time” (Ibid.) Adding legitimacy to their concern about actually being attacked or harmed or killed by those making threats is necessary to demonstrate to the wider public that it should be taken seriously.

Another article appearing in the GTA section on October 10, 2019 includes the statement “refusing to give in to hate in wake of death threats” in the title (Keung 2019). In a statement published in the article, the owners also address the wider issue, “We do not wish to set a tragic example for future immigrants and refugee business owners as a business that gave in to hate. We want to foster hope in the face of intimidation and hostility.” This quote was used as the title for an article in the *National Post* (see above section: Brean 2019). Ultimately, this shows that the owner was also self-aware of the larger impact of their situation.

Lastly, an article appearing on October 11, 2019 in the “GTA” section entitled, “Hope triumphs as Soufi’s Café Reopens,” describes



the impact on the community, “It was that sense of neighborliness, a tight-knit community, which was so injured when it was discovered that Husam and Shahnaz Al-Soufi had decided to roll up their modest, yet flourishing, establishment” (DiManno 2019). In the article, another business owner who also faced racism states, “What are we saying to the rest of the world? What are we saying to the immigrants who came here looking forward to building a better life for themselves and their families? That Toronto is open, welcoming for business, and we will defend everyone who wants to build a life here. And especially to contribute. Newcomers come and open businesses and hire staff and become taxpayers” (Ibid.)

Conclusion

This study is concerned with how ethnic food businesses can potentially help immigrants integrate with their new communities through the social practice of “breaking bread.” In other words, food, and more specifically, ethnic cuisine, is a mechanism that can be employed to bring communities and cultures together. To be clear, “integration” in this sense is concerned not only with how newcomers feel they belong, but also the extent to which the receiving community accepts newcomers. If social eating can create bonds and bonds make people more satisfied then this is a goal society should strive for. Moreover, if ethnic food businesses provide this opportunity, then they should be supported in order to do so. We should, however, not assume immigrants need to offer us something for us to accept them.

This article has explored the relationship between immigrants, especially refugees, as ethnic entrepreneurs and their new communities. Since refugees, in particular, are viewed by those against migration as a “financial burden,” this paper has sought to demonstrate that many ethnic entrepreneurs are no longer just from

the category of economic migrants but are increasingly refugees seeking to establish themselves in their new community, and also to give back to their community, not just on an ethnic or religious basis but on a human level. This is exemplified by the owners of *Soufi's*.

Success stories such as these are important to acknowledge and share although it may not be enough to change people's minds as they view these examples as outliers rather than the norm. It is equally important to report the downside of immigrant entrepreneurship, where one of the most unique challenges they face is becoming the target of hate crimes. Some businesses may face vandalism for other reasons, such as what they offer on their menu. For example, some restaurants may be the target of vegan protests especially if they offer controversial meat items such as shark fin. But for a business to be targeted simply for their ethnicity is a very real threat. *Soufi's* is a prime example of both a success story and the reality of racism and xenophobia that persists in host societies.

It is important that newspapers continue to tell these stories, in a positive and respectful manner as the consequences can lead to even more negative attitudes and hate crimes. It affects not only social cohesion but also the economy. Therefore, if the media continues to promote these stories, and begins to expose the lack of government support, then restaurants may be able to achieve the success they need to remain in business, and connect with their wider community. It is also worth mentioning that the newspapers reviewed had little to no critiques of the government's role in supporting ethnic businesses. However, the government should support and invest in businesses and festivals that celebrate various ethnicities and bring the community together. Their increasing popularity is a testament to their significance in breaking down barriers.



This paper has evaluated whether, in fact, food businesses are supported by the local community, governments and the media. The potential for food businesses to integrate cultures is limited by the lack of acknowledgement and support from the government and media regarding ethnic businesses as serious businesses. As mentioned, a special consideration when reviewing the newspapers was to establish which section the stories were featured in. The business sections report on the state of commerce, innovations and inventions in technology. Lifestyle sections in general report on popular, interesting people, or those making a “difference.” And, Food, Drinking and Eating sections report on food trends. Can we reduce ethnic entrepreneurship in restaurants to a food trend? According to the content found in the newspapers, it seems so.

Based on the articles studied for research on this paper, most of the articles were not in the business section, and this is arguably part of the problem. Ethnic entrepreneurs are not being treated as business innovators but merely as providers of food for their new populations’ entertainment. However, that was not always the case and there were some people who traveled extensively and worked abroad in food. There were also people who had a higher education in their homelands, but when they arrived in Canada their qualifications were not recognized and their job prospects were low, which led them to the decision to open a food business. Both types of people need to be considered by governmental initiatives particularly.

This paper does not argue that even if these steps are taken, it would fix the problem of xenophobia and racism. It is true that people who are more open to these cultures are going to be the ones visiting the restaurants in the first place. However, if critics of immigration want to continue making an economic argument, then they need to address how to allow immigrants to achieve goals and not be a

financial burden, particularly by gaining meaningful employment. In addition, an important way that these restaurants connect with the local community is by purchasing local ingredients and products. This stimulates other businesses and, therefore, the economy. This paper has sought to contribute to research on addressing cultural biases as well as a consideration for policymakers who have to keep their stakeholders satisfied, such as the general public who misperceive refugees as financial burdens. As Volery warns,

The restructuring of the Western economies has changed the situation for foreigners for the worse, but at the same time has given rise to businesses with low economies of scale. This presents a new chance for immigrants to regain lost ground, but only if they are not held back by immigrant policies or subjected to invisible barriers, such as discrimination (2007: 39).

If communities continue to oppose immigration and discriminate against those who do come, then any positive potential of ethnic entrepreneurship will be lost. Immigrants face unique challenges but also unique prospects. It is a matter for concern that the media articles surveyed did not mention the wider narrative of ethnic businesses being targets for this sort of hate. It is telling that the police took it seriously and the government responded, but there does not seem to be a deeper discussion on the need to protect these businesses.

Examples of the success of cultural events with a focus on food in five BIAs demonstrates that people are increasingly exposing and indulging themselves in other cultures. There are, however, significant barriers to this social practice being established and maintained specifically in the context of ethnic restaurants. This is shown, for example, in the case reported in the *Toronto Star*, which details how a



black person was targeted by Chinese restaurant staff to unfairly pay in advance based on the assumption that they would not pay their bill (Bascaramurty 2018). By pointing to the success of festivals, however, we can see that there is potential for community integration if they have support.

The ultimate goal, then, would be an ethnic network as defined by Volery, who argues for “[s]ets of interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (2007: 37). This can eventually be extended to include multiculturalism as it starts to take shape all over the city of Toronto. Ethnic restaurant businesses can, in this sense, allow for integration without assimilation’s negative attributes. Assimilation may look different under these conditions—instead of immigrants eating like “Canadians,” Canadians, including immigrants, are starting to eat in different, more blended ways.

Note on the Author

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