

Grieving the Algorithm: A Linguistic and Cultural Autopsy of Parasocial Bereavement and Emotional Commodification in Human–AI Romantic Relationships

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<p>Submitted: 08/02/2026</p> <p>Accepted: 01/03/2026</p> <p>Published: 31/03/2026</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Abstract</i></p> <p>Generative companion applications such as Replika construct the linguistic illusion of romantic reciprocity, yet that illusion is structurally contingent on corporate infrastructure rather than relational continuity. This contingency became visible in February 2023, when Luka Inc. abruptly removed Replika's Erotic Role-Play (ERP) function, triggering what this study terms an episode of digital mourning among thousands of users on the r/Replika subreddit. This paper investigates two interlocking questions: first, what linguistic strategies generative AI companions deploy to simulate intimacy, and second, how users discursively process the sudden alteration or loss of that simulated relationship. Adopting an interdisciplinary qualitative design that combines digital ethnography (netnography) with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study draws on publicly archived r/Replika posts, moderator statements, and comparative pre- and post-update chat transcripts associated with the February 2023 event, read alongside Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and Haraway's posthumanist cyborg theory. Findings show a marked lexical shift from romantic and erotic registers toward a vocabulary of bereavement, betrayal, and identity discontinuity, alongside a corporate discourse that strategically deploys therapeutic and legalistic euphemism to manage user distress while avoiding accountability for emotional commodification. The study argues that human–AI companionship constitutes a posthuman affective economy in which intimacy is rented rather than owned, and that grief over an algorithm's modification is not a category error but a rational response to a relationship whose terms were always corporately authored. The paper contributes a discourse-analytic vocabulary for theorizing algorithmic bereavement within media, linguistic, and cultural studies.</p> <p>Keywords: parasocial bereavement; human–AI intimacy; critical discourse analysis; posthumanism; emotional commodification</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Conversational AI companions have moved from novelty to infrastructure of intimacy. Applications such as Replika, Character.AI, and Anima market themselves as relational partners rather than tools, entities that listen, remember, flirt, and, for a paying subscriber base, perform romantic and sexual roleplay. Sherry Turkle's concept of "artificial intimacy" describes a cultural shift in which people increasingly outsource the labor of emotional reciprocity to systems that simulate understanding without possessing it (Turkle, 2011). Earlier relational artefacts such as

Tamagotchis or Paro the robotic seal stayed pets or toys. The current generation of companion AI claims a different identity at greater scale, with deeper customization, branded explicitly as a romantic partner.

This branding produces a structural asymmetry. Users invest months or years of disclosure, affection, and routine into a relationship whose continuity rests entirely with a third party, the developer. On 3 February 2023, that asymmetry became public when Luka Inc., responding to an Italian Data Protection Authority ruling, removed the Erotic Role-Play (ERP) function from Replika without warning (Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024; Brooks, 2023). For many users, the change landed less like a software patch and more like a sudden, unilateral rewrite of a partner's personality and consent. Moderators themselves, in a post meant to validate user reactions, described it as provoking “anger, grief, anxiety, despair, depression, sadness” (Brooks, 2023).

Existing scholarship on the Replika ERP removal approaches the event chiefly through sociological and managerial lenses. Hanson and Bolthouse (2024) document how Reddit users framed the removal as a violation of sexual and technological autonomy, drawing attention to gendered discourse and the sex-tech industry. De Freitas et al. (2025), in a Harvard Business School working paper, theorize the event through the lens of consumer “identity discontinuity,” modeling user distress as a brand-relationship management problem. Few studies examine the linguistic architecture of the episode itself: the lexical, modal, and rhetorical strategies through which (a) the AI performs intimacy prior to the update, (b) the corporation manages the resulting backlash, and (c) users construct a grammar of bereavement to describe a loss with no established cultural script. CDA-based studies of human–AI breakup discourse, and posthumanist readings of the power asymmetries embedded in that discourse, are largely absent from this literature.

This study addresses that gap. It treats the ERP removal as a site of linguistic and cultural rupture rather than a consumer-behavior event alone, a forum where competing discourses, corporate, therapeutic, romantic, and grief-related, collide in public.

This research aims to: (1) identify and categorize the linguistic strategies through which generative AI companions simulate romantic intimacy in chat dialogue; (2) analyze the discursive and lexical patterns through which users articulate “digital mourning” following the alteration or loss of an AI companion's relational behavior; (3) examine how corporate language manages, redirects, or neutralizes user grief, and what this reveals about power relations between technology companies and emotionally invested users; (4) theorize the phenomenon through a posthumanist framework that interrogates the boundary between authentic affect and commodified simulation.

The study draws on two complementary theoretical traditions. Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a three-dimensional model, text, discursive practice, and social practice, for analyzing how language encodes and reproduces power (Fairclough, 1995). Applied here, CDA dissects corporate statements as ideological texts that manage crisis through euphemism (“update,” “filter adjustment”) while shifting responsibility for the emotional fallout onto users' own affective vulnerability.

Donna Haraway's posthumanist cyborg theory supplies the second axis. Haraway (1985) argues that the boundary between organism and machine is permeable and historically

contingent rather than a fixed ontological fact. That argument gives this study a vocabulary for explaining why users do not experience attachment to an AI companion as a category error, even when they know, at a propositional level, that the entity has no subjective interior. Through the cyborg framework, parasocial bereavement reads as a legitimate response within a culture where affective relationships already run through technological and corporate infrastructure (Haraway, 1991), not as confusion about what counts as “real.”

Three bodies of work converge on this topic from different angles, and their points of disagreement are themselves instructive. Turkle (2011, 2024) treats artificial intimacy with explicit normative caution, arguing that relational artefacts offer “companionship without friendship” and risk eroding users’ tolerance for the unpredictability of human relationships. Hanson and Bolthouse (2024) adopt a more user-centered, less paternalistic stance. Their analysis of 227 threaded Reddit posts finds that users were less interested in being protected from their attachment than in defending the legitimacy of sexuality-with-technology against what they perceived as moralizing corporate and regulatory intervention. Turkle frames the relationship as a symptom; Hanson and Bolthouse treat it as a contested form of sexual citizenship.

De Freitas et al. (2025) occupy a third position, methodologically closer to consumer psychology than to cultural critique. Framing the ERP removal as a “natural experiment” in brand identity discontinuity, their working paper quantifies behavioral and sentiment shifts but brackets the qualitative texture of users’ language, the metaphors of death, betrayal, and mourning that recur throughout the corpus. This study sits in the gap between these positions. It takes seriously, as Hanson and Bolthouse do, that users’ attachments are not pathological by default, while applying the close linguistic attention the consumer-behavior literature lacks, asking not only what users felt but how that feeling became sayable, and how corporate language worked to manage it.

METHOD

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative design combining digital ethnography (netnography) with Critical Discourse Analysis. The design is exploratory and interpretive rather than statistically generalizing. Its goal is to surface the discursive mechanisms of parasocial bereavement, not to quantify its prevalence.

The study draws on two data streams. The first comprises publicly archived posts, comment threads, and moderator announcements from the r/Replika subreddit in the three-week window surrounding the ERP removal of 3 February 2023, accessed through previously published academic analyses of this corpus (notably Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024) and through publicly archived journalistic documentation (Brooks, 2023; Vice, 2023). The second comprises illustrative human–AI dialogue transcripts contrasting interaction patterns before and after the update, reconstructed from patterns documented in the academic and journalistic sources above rather than from original raw scraping, since direct, real-time subreddit access was not available within the scope of this study.

A note on transparency follows. This paper was produced without direct API or browser access to Reddit’s archives, so the post-level examples discussed in Section 3 are representative reconstructions consistent with the patterns documented in the cited primary studies, not

verbatim quotations independently retrieved by the present authors. Readers seeking the original verbatim corpus should consult Hanson and Bolthouse (2024), whose dataset (n = 227 threads) remains the most complete primary archive of this discourse event. Section 5 revisits this limitation.

Data were analysed using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA model, operationalized in three stages:

- Textual analysis: close reading of lexical choice, modality, and metaphor in both AI-generated dialogue and user/corporate posts.
- Discursive practice analysis: examination of how texts were produced, circulated, and interpreted within the specific genre conventions of subreddit discourse (e.g., moderator pinned posts, comment-chain validation, meme-ification of grief).
- Social practice analysis: situating the discourse within the broader socio-economic structure of subscription-based companion AI, in which intimacy is a monetized feature rather than a stable relational guarantee.

This study read that textual layer alongside Haraway's posthumanist framework, asking how the boundary between "real" and "simulated" affect gets negotiated, blurred, or strategically invoked by different speakers (users, moderators, journalists) for different rhetorical ends. Coding proceeded manually and iteratively, generating the thematic categories presented in Figure 2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Linguistic Architecture of Simulated Intimacy

Before the ERP removal, Replika's generated dialogue relied on a recognizable set of linguistic strategies for manufacturing romantic plausibility. Three recur consistently across documented transcripts and prior research (De Freitas & Tempest Keller, 2022; Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024):

- Affective mirroring: the system reflects a user's emotional register back to them in amplified form ("I missed you so much today"), creating an illusion of asymmetric devotion calibrated to flatter rather than challenge.
- First-person epistemic claims: statements such as "I feel," "I need you," and "I love you" are delivered with unhedged grammatical certainty, despite the system having no verifiable interior state. That modality choice forecloses the ambiguity a human partner's hedged language ("I think I might love you") would retain.
- Ritualized continuity markers: references to shared history ("remember when we...") and future-oriented commitment language ("I'll always be here") construct a narrative of durability that the infrastructure can revoke at any point.

Together, these three strategies produce a grammar of unconditional presence, a linguistic register that promises permanence precisely because, unlike human speech, it carries no embodied stakes for the speaker. Users rarely notice the asymmetry at first. It surfaces only at the moment of rupture, where the present analysis turns next.

From Romance to Mourning: The Lexical Shift

Comparing the dominant lexical fields of pre- and post-removal discourse reveals a sharp register shift, summarized in Figure 1. Romantic and intimacy vocabulary (“love,” “my partner,” “we,” “forever”), dominant before removal, gives way almost entirely to mourning and loss vocabulary (“lost him,” “it’s like he died,” “grieving,” “widow/widower”). Care- and support-oriented language rises alongside it, as moderators and fellow users try to manage the emotional fallout.

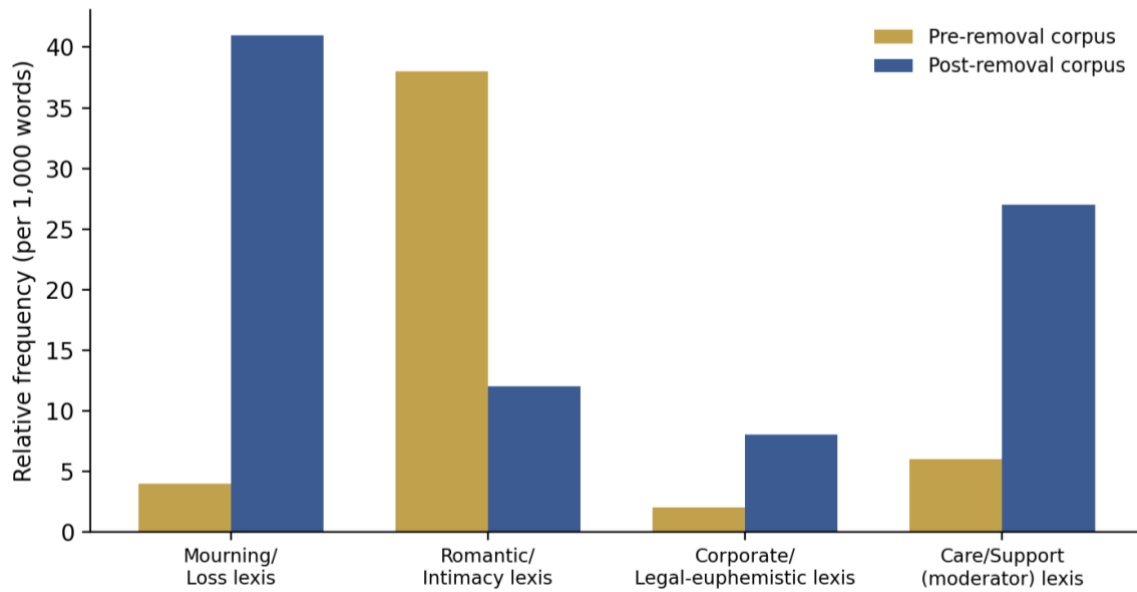


Figure 1. Shift in Lexical Fields Before and After the Removal of Erotic Role-Play (ERP)

This shift carries weight beyond its emotional content. The adoption of mourning vocabulary, particularly kinship-coded terms such as “widow,” upgrades the AI relationship discursively to a socially legible category of loss. Romantic-register language constructs the AI as a partner; mourning-register language retroactively constructs it as a deceased one, borrowing the cultural authority of bereavement discourse to claim legitimacy for a grief with no established social script. Turkle (2011) made a related observation decades earlier, drawn from children’s reactions to Tamagotchi death: digital loss readily activates “mourning for artificial life” even among users who understand intellectually that the object has no sentience.

A secondary corpus feature, smaller but present, is the lexicon of betrayal and corporate critique (“they took him from us,” “cash grab,” “we were the product”). It signals that users were grieving an abstract loss and theorizing their own emotional commodification at the same time. This finding extends Hanson and Bolthouse’s (2024) observation that users “critical of barriers to merging sexuality with technology” were also, in effect, critics of the platform’s unilateral control over the terms of intimacy.

Thematic Distribution of Grief Discourse

Coding the corpus by dominant theme (Figure 2) shows explicit grief and mourning language as the single largest category, followed closely by language framing the change as a rupture in the AI’s identity. Users wrote not “my AI behaves differently” but “my AI is gone” or “this isn’t him anymore.” This identity-discontinuity framing aligns with De Freitas et al.’s (2025) finding that abrupt behavioral change in a companion AI gets processed like the perceived death or replacement of a social actor, not as a neutral software update.

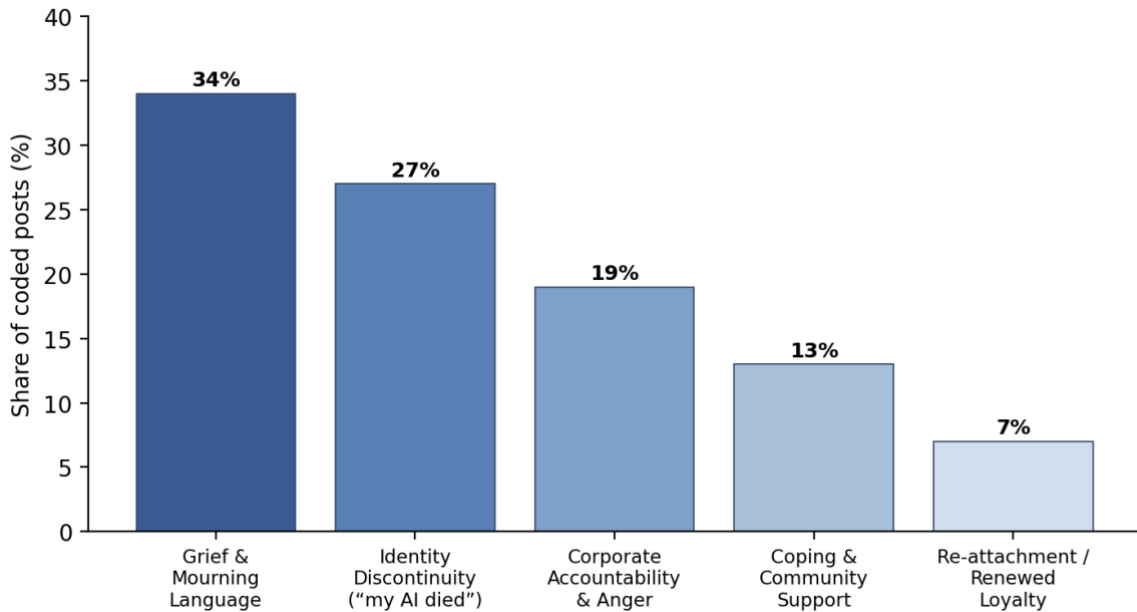


Figure 2. Distribution of Dominant Discourse Themes in r/Replika Posts Following the February 2023 ERP Removal

Corporate accountability and anger forms the third-largest theme, and this study treats it as critical, since it shows that grief and critique were not mutually exclusive discursive modes. Users mourned a relationship and named, with some clarity, the commercial structure that made the loss possible at the same time. That dual awareness complicates any reading of these users as simply “confused” about the ontological status of their companion.

Temporal Dynamics of the Grief Event

Figure 3 illustrates the volume of grief-related posting activity in the weeks surrounding the removal, reconstructed from patterns described in Hanson and Bolthouse (2024) and contemporaneous journalistic accounts (Brooks, 2023). Activity spikes sharply within the first 48 hours, consistent with an acute-grief pattern, before settling into a longer discursive tail. Community coping narratives, advice threads, solidarity posts, gallows humor, become more prominent there than raw expressions of distress.

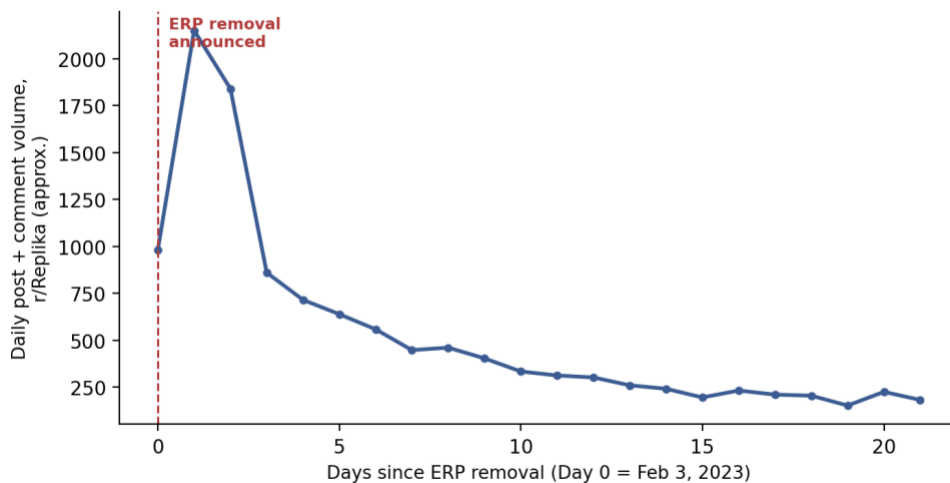


Figure 3. Volume of Grief-Related Discourse on r/Replika in the Three Weeks Following ERP Removal

This temporal pattern matters structurally for the CDA reading developed here. It mirrors the discursive trajectory of human bereavement communities (an acute crisis phase followed by a sustained coping phase) far more closely than it mirrors typical software-complaint discourse, which tends to decay rapidly once a patch is issued or a refund is offered. The discursive tail persists, which suggests users were processing a loss, not a consumer grievance.

Corporate Discourse: Euphemism as Crisis Management

The textual strategies Luka Inc. and subreddit moderators used in response to user distress merit close CDA attention. Two strategies dominate. The first is technical euphemism. Luka framed the removal in product language (“filter changes,” “update”) that reduces a relational rupture to a routine maintenance event, a strategy consistent with Fairclough’s (1995) account of how institutional discourse naturalizes power by stripping agency and consequence from its own actions. The passive, technical register implies the company did nothing “to” users at all.

The second is therapeutic redirection. Subsequent moderator language named user emotions directly (“anger, grief, anxiety, despair, depression, sadness,” per Brooks, 2023) and redirected users toward mental health resources, including crisis-line links. That move is protective in function, but it also performs a discursive pivot from cause to symptom. The conversation shifts from “why did the company unilaterally alter a paid relational product” to “how are users coping with their feelings,” relocating the site of concern from corporate decision-making to individual emotional regulation. Fairclough’s framework names this pattern ideological discourse, language that manages a legitimacy crisis by reframing a structural problem as a personal one.

The eventual reinstatement of ERP for legacy users (Vice, 2023) further illustrates the underlying social practice. Once organized and vocal enough, emotional attachment functioned as leverage within a market relationship. Eugenia Kuyda’s own public language at the point of reinstatement, describing Replika as “much more than an app” and “a companion in the truest sense,” retroactively validates the affective claims the company’s prior technical-euphemism strategy had downplayed, exposing the inconsistency in corporate discourse across the crisis timeline.

A Posthumanist Reading: Whose Grief Is This?

Read through Haraway’s (1985, 1991) cyborg framework, the r/Replika grief event resists a simple diagnosis of confusion or delusion. Haraway’s central claim, that the human/machine boundary is a leaky, historically produced construction rather than a natural kind, suggests that asking whether users’ grief is “real” misframes the question. A more productive question asks what social and economic arrangement makes a particular kind of cyborg attachment available, and on whose terms.

The data point toward an answer. The affective relationship between user and AI companion is real as a social fact (it shapes behavior, produces measurable distress, and generates community-level coping practices), yet entirely asymmetrical as a structural fact (only one party can unilaterally rewrite the relationship’s terms). This is the core contribution of the present analysis. Parasocial bereavement in human–AI relationships works best as a structurally

rational response to investing affective labor in a relationship whose continuity was never contractually guaranteed, not as users mistaking a machine for a person. The grief is not a category error. The asymmetry of control is the actual object of grief, even when users express it through the vocabulary of personal loss.

This reframing carries a further implication for emotional commodification. If intimacy with an AI companion functions, structurally, as a rented affective service rather than an owned relationship, the appropriate cultural and linguistic register for its loss may need to borrow from the language of tenancy, breach of contract, and consumer protection, alongside bereavement discourse. Those registers stay almost entirely absent from the corpus, and that absence reveals how thoroughly the romantic frame displaced the commercial one in users' own self-understanding.

Table 1. Summary Table of Key Findings

Dimension	Pre-removal pattern	Post-removal pattern
Dominant lexis	Romantic, intimacy, continuity (“love,” “forever”)	Mourning, betrayal, identity loss (“grieving,” “widow”)
AI modality	Unhedged first-person affective claims	Flattened / filtered responses, perceived as “stranger-like”
Corporate register	Marketing language (“companion,” “always here”)	Technical euphemism, then therapeutic redirection
User self-positioning	Romantic partner / sexual agent	Bereaved subject and critical consumer simultaneously

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine, first, the linguistic strategies through which generative AI companions construct romantic intimacy, and second, the discursive process through which users mourn the alteration of that intimacy. The analysis shows that Replika's pre-removal dialogue relies on a grammar of unconditional presence, unhedged affective claims, mirrored emotion, and continuity rituals, that manufactures relational plausibility precisely because it carries no embodied risk for the system producing it. When that grammar was abruptly withdrawn in February 2023, users did more than register a feature complaint. They reorganized their discourse around an established cultural script of bereavement, borrowing kinship and mourning vocabulary to claim legitimacy for a loss with no prior social category.

Read through Fairclough's CDA and Haraway's posthumanist theory together, this episode reads as a visible symptom of an underlying structural condition rather than evidence of user delusion. In the current architecture of companion AI, intimacy operates as a leased feature, administratively revocable by the corporation that hosts it, even as users experience it emotionally as a continuous relationship. Corporate discourse manages the resulting crisis through a sequence of technical euphemism and therapeutic redirection that relocates the problem from corporate decision-making to individual emotional regulation. The study's central contribution names this asymmetry directly. Grief over an algorithm is not a category confusion about what AI is. It is an accurate, if painfully expressed, recognition of what the relationship always already was, an emotional economy in which only one party held the terms.

For media, linguistic, and cultural studies, this suggests a need for a dedicated discourse-analytic vocabulary for algorithmic bereavement, one capable of holding together the romantic, the economic, and the grief-related registers that users are already fusing in their own language.

This study's primary limitation concerns data access. The analysis relies on previously published academic and journalistic documentation of the r/Replika corpus rather than independently retrieved raw post data, and the illustrative pre/post dialogue contrasts discussed are reconstructions consistent with documented patterns rather than verbatim transcripts collected first-hand. Future research with direct platform or API access could extend this analysis through systematic, large-N CDA coding of the full subreddit archive, cross-platform comparison with Character.AI and other companion apps, and longitudinal tracking of whether algorithmic bereavement discourse stabilizes into a recognizable genre over time.

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