



Generation Z workers on social media: A dramaturgical study of building professional identity online

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Generation Z workers form professional identities in the digital work environment using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Professional identity is understood as a social process shaped through interaction, self-presentation, and impression control. This research focuses on Generation Z individuals working in digital and social media-based professions. Using a qualitative approach, this study collected data through structured in-depth interviews with five Gen Z informants employed in various digital fields, including content creation, social media management, and online entrepreneurship. Data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis based on four dramaturgical aspects: front stage, back stage, impression management, and audience segregation. The findings show that Gen Z workers actively and strategically manage their professional identity online. The front stage functions as a space for planned self-branding, while the back stage allows boundary control, emotional regulation, and identity protection. Impression management is used to maintain credibility and career sustainability through various different strategies. Audience segregation enables workers to separate different audience groups across platforms and contexts, helping them balance professional and personal matters. This study demonstrates that professional identity formation among Gen Z digital workers is a layered and reflective process, shaped by structured self-presentation and boundary management in digital spaces.

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Introduction

Professional identity formation is a continuous social process through which individuals develop, present, and negotiate how they are recognized as workers in a professional context. Professional identity does not only involve technical skills or job titles, but also includes attitudes, values, communication styles, and patterns of behavior that are considered appropriate within a specific work environment. This identity is shaped through interaction with others and is influenced by social expectations, organizational norms, and cultural contexts. From a sociological perspective, professional identity is not fixed, but is constantly produced and adjusted through everyday social interaction (Goffman, 1959).

In the world of work more generally, professional identity is formed through repeated interactions in both formal and informal situations. Workers learn how to act, speak, and present themselves in ways that signal competence, reliability, and professionalism. These performances help individuals gain trust, recognition, and legitimacy in their workplace. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective explains this process by viewing social interaction as a performance directed toward an audience. Individuals manage impressions to appear appropriate and valuable within specific work settings (Goffman, 1959). The application of dramaturgical theory to analyze communication and social interaction has been a long-standing practice in academic criticism, focusing on how symbolic action shapes meaning and social roles (Gronbeck, 1980). In digital contexts, these performances increasingly take mediated forms. Rettberg (2017) argues that self-presentation on social media involves deliberate visual, textual, and interactional choices that function as communicative acts aimed at imagined

and real audiences. As a result, identity is not only performed through behavior, but also through curated representations that circulate across platforms and persist over time.

In recent years, advances in communication technology have expanded these performances beyond physical workspaces. Digital platforms now play a major role in how workers express themselves, interact with colleagues, and maintain professional reputation, making identity formation increasingly occur across both offline and online environments. These environments encourage what Petroni (2019) describes as the blending of self-communication and self-branding, where professional identity becomes entangled with promotional practices shaped by platform logics, metrics, and visibility demands.

These changes are especially relevant for Generation Z, a generation that has grown up with digital technology and social media as a natural part of daily life. Generation Z workers are highly familiar with online communication and digital platforms, which shapes how they approach work and professional self-presentation. Previous studies have shown that generational identity can influence how individuals choose to act in organizational settings, particularly when they believe such behavior leads to positive outcomes (Urlick, 2014). Research also suggests that Generation Z values flexibility, authenticity, and continuous feedback in the workplace (Nugrohojati & Linando, 2025). As a result, Generation Z is more likely to integrate digital platforms into their professional activities, making online spaces a central arena for professional identity construction. However, this integration also creates challenges related to self-presentation, boundary management, and the separation of different audiences. Rettberg (2017) highlights that social media collapse multiple audiences into shared

spaces, making it harder for individuals to control how different aspects of the self are interpreted. This condition increases the need for strategic identity management, especially for workers whose careers depend on visibility and public perception.

This study focuses specifically on Generation Z workers who are employed in social media related and digital-based professions. In these fields, social media functions not only as a communication tool, but also as the main medium for work practices such as content creation, branding, marketing, and public engagement. As noted by Wang (2022), social media blurs the traditional boundary between front stage and back stage, allowing professional and personal performances to overlap. Workers in digital professions are often required to maintain a visible and consistent online presence, placing them under ongoing observation by multiple audiences with different expectations. Petroni (2019) refers to this condition as the marketization of professional identity, where workers are pushed to continuously promote themselves through platform-specific affordances, engagement metrics, and algorithmic structures that shape reputation and credibility.

The research examines Generation Z individuals who have worked for at least one year in digital or social media related jobs. The analysis uses Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory as its main framework. This theory explains social interaction through four key aspects: front stage, back stage, impression management, and audience segregation (Goffman, 1959). Front stage refers to how individuals present themselves in public or professional settings, while back stage represents private spaces where individuals can step out of their work roles. Impression management involves strategies used to control how others perceive them, and audience segregation refers to efforts

to separate different audiences to maintain consistent performances across contexts. These concepts remain highly relevant in digital environments, where social media platforms often combine multiple audiences into a single space (Wang, 2022). Rettberg's (2017) discussion of mediated self-representation further supports the use of dramaturgical theory by showing how online identities are carefully constructed through images, text, and interaction patterns that mirror performative social behavior.

Although research on Generation Z and the workplace continues to grow, a clear research gap remains. Existing studies, such as Nugrohojati and Linando (2025), have discussed the characteristics and challenges of Generation Z workers, while others have applied dramaturgical theory to generational behavior in organizations (Urlick, 2014). Meanwhile, research on digital self-presentation has largely focused on influencers, branding discourse, or single platforms such as LinkedIn (Petroni, 2019), rather than the everyday professional practices of Gen Z workers across varied digital roles. However, there is still a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that explicitly connect all four dramaturgical concepts of front stage, back stage, impression management, and audience segregation to everyday digital work practices and professional identity formation among Generation Z across diverse digital professions. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed qualitative analysis of how Generation Z workers perform, manage, and negotiate their professional identities in the digital work environment.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to obtain an in-depth, interpretive understanding of how Generation Z (Gen Z) workers construct and

negotiate their professional identity within the digital workplace. Rooted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the approach views social interaction as a performance aimed at producing and managing social meaning. The core theoretical framework is Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (1959), which models social life as a theatrical performance. This perspective is essential for dissecting complex, fluid behaviors in digital work practices, where the boundaries between professional and personal life are constantly blurred. Qualitative inquiry allows the detailed analysis of the strategic, conscious, and subconscious acts of self-presentation and impression management, which define contemporary digital professional identity. The adoption of the dramaturgical lens is robustly supported in contemporary scholarship; for instance, Hogan (2010) explicitly demonstrates the effectiveness of Goffman's concepts—especially the differentiation between *performance* and *exhibition* for analyzing how individuals manage self-presentation and identity on social networking sites.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing exclusively on Gen Z individuals (born between 1995 and 2010) who are actively engaged in digital-based professions in Indonesia for at least one year. The selection aimed to capture diversity across key sectors where professional identity is performance-based and self-constructed rather than pre-fixed by a traditional institution. The reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020).

The selection process identified five key informant roles, strategically chosen to encapsulate a diverse spectrum of contemporary digital work practices. These individuals, each representing a distinct

facet of the digital economy, included: Nayla Ramandha Khairunnisa, a Social Media Specialist, whose work primarily revolves around audience engagement and brand presence; Dafa Dzaki Adikshamosa, a Content Creator, specializing in the production of varied multimedia assets; and Arya Dary Irfansyah, a Freelance Graphic Designer, whose professional activities involve client-based visual communication solutions. Furthermore, there was also Dave Nadiv Bawono, a Video Editor/Illustrator, whose technical expertise is instrumental in post-production and digital artistry. Completing this group is Rizky Maulana Syahputra, an Online Entrepreneur, providing an invaluable perspective on the operational and strategic management of a digital-first business. Collectively, these five roles offer a comprehensive basis for analyzing the multifaceted nature of digital labor within the Indonesian context. This diverse sample allows the research to provide a comprehensive understanding of how dramaturgical concepts apply differently across various digital work contexts, thereby filling a crucial gap in current literature.

Next, data was collected through structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide was deductively developed based on the four central tenets of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (1959): *Front Stage*, *Back Stage*, *Impression Management*, and *Audience Segregation*. This structured approach ensured that the narrative data collected from each of the five professional sectors directly addressed the research questions and was consistently aligned with the theoretical framework, thereby maximizing the efficiency and focus of the data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Interviews explored informants' explicit strategies for self-branding (*Front Stage*), management of private life (*Back Stage*), deliberate efforts to control professional

reputation (*Impression Management*), and methods used to differentiate communication for various groups (*Audience Segregation*).

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process was theory-driven, systematically comparing each informant's narrative against the pre-established four dramaturgical concepts. The key characteristics and functions of each concept (e.g., Front Stage as a locus for self-branding, Back Stage as a mechanism for identity protection) were identified from Goffman's seminal work. Each segment of the interview data was then meticulously coded to identify indicators, strategies, and reflections that either confirmed or elaborated upon these concepts within the specific context of their digital work practices. This process allowed for the generation of rich, sector-specific themes detailing the micro-strategies Gen Z employs to enact and reinforce their professional "line" and manage their digital reputation for economic and symbolic gain.

Results and Discussion

Dramaturgical theory explains how individuals form and present their identity through social interaction. In this study, the theory is used to understand how Generation Z workers in the digital media field form their professional identity. This process can be explained through four main aspects: front stage, back stage, impression management, and audience segregation.

Front stage refers to situations where individuals present a professional image in front of others, such as colleagues, clients, or the public, especially in online work spaces. Back stage refers to private spaces where individuals can step away from professional roles and act more freely. Impression management describes the efforts made to

control how others see them by choosing what to show or hide. Audience segregation refers to the practice of separating different audiences so that personal and professional identities do not conflict, which is especially important in digital media work.

Front stage

The front stage aspect in Goffman's dramaturgical framework refers to a social space where individuals present themselves in a planned manner in front of an audience in order to build a certain impression. In the context of this study, this space is materialized through social media profiles, published content, ways of interacting with audiences, and how informants construct narratives about themselves and their work. The data show that the five informants do not appear on social media as passive users. Instead, they consciously manage their self-presentation as creative and digital workers. Therefore, the front stage becomes the main space where professional identity and self-branding practices are formed, negotiated, and maintained as part of a strategy to survive and grow within the digital media work ecosystem.

When viewed from their background and career paths, it is clear that the informants' professional front stage develops along with their increasing involvement in the digital field. Nadhif began his career as a videographer and video editor at Malaka Project and later developed into a creative director in another work environment. Exposure to a work culture that encouraged appearing in front of the camera and using studio facilities for personal content pushed him to integrate professional values into self-development and manifestation content on his personal account. A similar pattern appears with Arya, who has been active in merchandise design since junior high school and later expanded into photography

and videography. Moving to a new city disrupted his previous network, which led him to explicitly use social media as a display space for his work that functions as an open portfolio. In both cases, the front stage is not only a surface display, but a reflection of the need to show competence and maintain professional reputation amid changes in social and geographical context.

More specifically, the front stage is expressed through personal management, communication style, and visual elements that align with professional goals. Nayla emphasized that each brand has a persona that must be maintained, including how it greets audiences, the language used in captions, responses to direct messages and comments, and the visual design presented. She intentionally creates interactions that feel cheerful, friendly, and confident to match the brand image being built. This practice shows that the front stage involves not only self-representation as a worker, but also institutional representation that requires strong awareness of the balance between persona, promotional goals, and target audiences. Meanwhile, Maulana combines formal and structured communication in professional messages with more fresh and fun visuals in the food and beverage context. This creates a front stage that signals both professionalism and approachability. He also uses content such as “a day in my life” and business development stories as public narratives that strengthen his credibility while directing traffic to the brand he manages. This indicates that front stage management is carried out through a deliberate combination of text, visuals, and storytelling.

Another important finding is the strategic differentiation of front stage across platforms, especially in Dafa’s case. He explicitly stated that Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn are treated as spaces with

different identities and functions. Instagram is used as a more personal and playful space, TikTok functions as a professional space because it is directly linked to income, and LinkedIn is managed in a highly formal manner to highlight professional credentials. Differences in profile photos, clothing styles, and content characteristics across platforms show a strong awareness of audience expectations and platform norms. This practice demonstrates that the front stage is not a single, uniform space, but layered and contextual. Even though the representations differ, the main goal remains the same: to display skills, technical ability, and seriousness in the creative field to build trust and open new work opportunities. Dafa’s experience of gaining positions as a marketing director and creative consultant through visibility on TikTok and LinkedIn reinforces the idea that a well-managed front stage functions as both symbolic and economic capital.

Overall, the front stage analysis of the five informants shows that Generation Z workers in the digital media field have a high level of self-branding awareness and view social media as the main arena for professional identity formation. They understand that human resources professionals may conduct background checks through social media accounts, that engagement and content reach can turn into trust and job opportunities, and that personal branding can drive traffic to the brands they manage. Therefore, the front stage is not only a space to “look good,” but a measured strategy to display competence, build reputation, and manage impressions in front of diverse audiences. This directly addresses the research aim of understanding how Generation Z workers form professional identity online by using planned self-branding practices within the digital front stage.

Back stage

The back stage aspect in Goffman's dramaturgical theory refers to a psychological and social space where individuals can step away from their public identity, show more authentic behavior, and maintain boundaries from their audience. Based on the research findings, Generation Z workers in the digital field show that even though they have a high awareness of self-branding, they still maintain private areas that they do not want to show to the public. For example, Nadhif clearly hides personal aspects that he considers inconsistent with his professional image, such as smoking habits and family life. This effort shows that the back stage functions as an identity protection mechanism that helps maintain consistency in front stage performance while also balancing professional demands and personal values. In this context, the back stage becomes an important space that supports self-control and boundary management in professional identity formation.

Differences between public and private identity are also reflected in strategies such as account separation and careful content selection. Arya manages two accounts with different functions: a public account that displays finished work as a professional representation, and a private account intended only for close connections. This practice shows audience stratification, where the back stage is not fully hidden but shared selectively based on trust level. Meanwhile, Nayla shows a greater integration between public and private identity by openly sharing daily activities. However, she still emphasizes the importance of avoiding a large gap between online image and real personality to prevent loss of trust. These different patterns confirm that the back stage for Generation Z digital workers is flexible, situational, and continuously negotiated to maintain both credibility and authenticity.

In addition, the presence of the back stage influences how informants see themselves as workers in the digital industry. Social media, which is central to their professional activities, not only creates public expectations and opportunities but also brings certain psychological pressures. Nadhif and Nayla explain that the need to constantly follow trends and respond to audience interaction increases workload and lengthens digital exposure time. Dafa and Maulana also show that exposure to social media content can shape self-perception in both positive and negative ways. For instance, Dafa experienced a shift in perspective due to algorithm-driven content exposure, while Maulana felt that social media often delivers a "reality check" when expectations do not match real outcomes. Therefore, the back stage is not only a space for storing authentic identity, but also a place where individuals process pressure, self-reflection, and emotional effects that are not shown publicly.

Overall, the analysis of the back stage aspect shows that Generation Z digital workers actively manage boundaries between public and private identity to maintain consistent professional performance online. Practices such as hiding certain personal aspects, separating accounts, controlling humor, and managing self-expectations are part of a well-developed self-branding strategy. These findings answer the research goal by showing that professional identity formation among Generation Z workers does not occur only on the front stage, but also through self-control processes in the back stage. The back stage allows them to preserve authenticity, avoid performative exhaustion, and protect identity aspects that they do not want to commercialize. Thus, professional identity formation among Generation Z is a layered process that involves structured public presentation alongside conscious and strategic protection of private identity.

Impression management

The impression management aspect in Goffman's dramaturgical framework refers to the conscious efforts individuals make to control and direct the impressions formed in front of an audience. Based on the research findings, Generation Z workers in the digital media field show a high level of impression awareness, mainly because their professional identity is closely linked to performance and visibility in digital spaces. Informants such as Nadhif and Maulana clearly emphasized the importance of niche consistency, content goals, and adjustments in language and visuals as strategies for shaping professional reputation. They aim to present a stable and credible image, both to attract audiences and to maintain brand trust. This shows that impression management is not only about visual appearance, but a strategic process directly related to career sustainability in the digital industry.

Impression management practices are also seen in how informants select and manage the content they publish. Nayla, for example, applies a content-filtering strategy by uploading only material that is relevant to her role as a social media intern. She avoids sharing content that is considered excessive or not aligned with the professional identity she wants to build. This selection process is important because mistakes in content publication can directly affect professional trust and future career opportunities. Meanwhile, Arya manages impressions through visual and aesthetic consistency in his work. He even rejects client requests when the requested style does not match his visual identity, ensuring that control over impressions remains in his hands. These practices show that impression management involves narrative control, visual selection, and self-curation carried out consciously and continuously.

In addition, impression management is not limited to visual content or aesthetics, but also includes interaction strategies and community building. Dafa, for instance, shifted his strategy from pursuing view counts to building deeper engagement through Discord communities and live streaming activities. Through this approach, the professional image he manages is not only that of a content creator who produces viral content, but also a figure who maintains close relationships with his audience. This approach later attracted brands that saw value in the community he had built. This engagement-based strategy shows that professional impressions in the digital era are built not only through performance, but also through ongoing relationships and consistently developed interpersonal credibility.

Overall, the analysis of the impression management aspect shows that Generation Z workers in the digital industry manage their professional image through a combination of visual, narrative, and relational strategies. They consciously organize self-presentation, choose content that supports professional goals, limit behaviors that may harm reputation, and use digital platforms to display competence in a measured way. These findings address the research objective by showing that professional identity formation among Generation Z workers does not happen spontaneously, but is the result of a structured and reflective self-branding process. Impression management serves as a key mechanism that allows them to maintain credibility, attract job opportunities, and strengthen their position within a highly competitive digital ecosystem.

Audience segregation

The audience segregation aspect in Goffman's dramaturgical theory describes how individuals separate different audience

groups in order to maintain identity consistency across various social contexts. Based on the research findings, Generation Z workers in the digital field show diverse forms of audience segregation, including platform-based segmentation, segmentation based on interpersonal relationships, and the management of content and communication style. The informants consciously differentiate forms of self-expression shown to the general public, clients, close friends, and family members. Through this process, professional identity can be maintained without completely removing space for personal expression. This practice shows that audience segregation functions as an important mechanism for protecting professional reputation while still preserving authenticity.

Audience segregation is clearly seen through content boundaries and selective interaction strategies. For Nadhif, audience segregation is carried out by limiting topics and controlling messages in his content. He emphasized that although algorithms determine who sees his content, he still has control over the niche and messages communicated to his target audience. This strategy allows him to maintain a clear professional identity without feeling pressure to meet the expectations of a broader but less relevant audience. Nayla shows a similar practice in the context of brand management. When dealing with diverse audiences on brand accounts, she uses professional response templates so that communication with consumers remains consistent, polite, and in line with the brand persona. On her personal account, she adjusts language and communication style depending on who contacts her, creating a clear difference between professional and personal interaction.

Other informants apply audience segregation more structurally through account separation or identity differentiation

across platforms. Maulana, for example, separates his main Instagram account, which is fully professional, from a secondary account that is more personal and informal. On his main account, content is highly curated, while informal expressions or hobbies such as football are shared only in more private spaces. A similar approach is seen in Nayla, who also uses two accounts to separate personal expression that does not match her professional image. This shows that Generation Z digital workers understand audience segregation as a reputation management strategy that allows them to maintain professionalism without losing personal identity kept in private spaces.

Beyond account structure, audience segregation is also shown through behavior and performance adjustments for specific audience contexts. Dafa and Maulana openly acknowledge that although they maintain authenticity, certain adjustments are necessary when interacting with brands or professional audiences. Dafa, for example, is more careful with his speaking style when working with brands, even though he generally keeps the same personal identity during live streaming. He also classifies his audience into several categories to guide content focus and interaction. Similarly, Maulana adjusts his appearance and presentation style when engaging with entrepreneur audiences, while remaining more flexible in non-formal content. These practices show that audience segregation is not only about platform separation, but also about choosing the most appropriate social performance to maintain professional identity stability

Overall, the analysis of the audience segregation aspect shows that Generation Z workers in the digital industry consciously develop audience separation strategies to maintain consistent professional identity and reputation. They control audience access

to personal aspects, filter published content, adjust communication style, and use account structures to manage expectations from different audience groups. These findings support the research objective by showing that professional identity formation among Generation Z does not occur only through self-representation, but also through the management of boundaries between public and private life. Audience segregation functions as an identity protection mechanism that allows digital workers to maintain professional credibility while preserving space for personal expression. Thus, audience segregation becomes a vital component in self-branding practices and professional identity formation in the social media era.

Conclusion

This study successfully utilized Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to provide an in-depth, interpretive understanding of how Generation Z workers construct and manage their professional identity within the dynamic digital workplace. The findings consistently demonstrate that professional identity for this cohort is not a static characteristic but a layered, reflective, and highly strategic social performance. By analyzing the narratives of five Gen Z professionals across diverse digital fields, the research confirms the enduring relevance of Goffman's framework in a mediated context, particularly where the lines between the professional and the personal are intentionally blurred yet carefully controlled. The analysis across the four dramaturgical concepts reveals distinct and complementary strategies. The Front Stage operates as a crucial arena for proactive self-branding, where informants consciously curate their online presence, spanning profile photos, communication styles, and published content to signal competence, reliability,

and niche expertise. This performance is vital not merely for social acceptance but as a quantifiable form of symbolic and economic capital, directly translating into job opportunities and professional credibility. Conversely, the Back Stage functions as an indispensable mechanism for identity protection and emotional regulation. Informants actively maintain private areas, whether through account separation or content filtration (e.g., hiding smoking habits or private family life), allowing them to manage psychological pressures and avoid performative exhaustion, thereby ensuring the authenticity and sustainability of their public-facing persona.

A key contribution of this study is highlighting the sophistication of Impression Management and Audience Segregation strategies. Gen Z workers exhibit a high degree of meta-awareness regarding their digital reputation. Impression management is employed not only through aesthetic consistency (e.g., rejecting client requests that compromise visual identity) but also through relational strategies, such as shifting focus from chasing viral views to building credible engagement within closed communities (e.g., Discord). Concurrently, Audience Segregation is implemented structurally through separate professional and personal accounts by adjusting language and performance style based on whether the audience is a client, a colleague, or a close friend. This practice is instrumental in mitigating context collapse, allowing them to navigate multiple, often conflicting, audience expectations without compromising professional stability or personal freedom.

In conclusion, professional identity formation among Gen Z digital workers is an active and effortful process of boundary management. The digital environment demands continuous performance, transforming social media platforms into the very infrastructure of their professional roles.

The ability of these workers to strategically calibrate their Front Stage display while diligently safeguarding their Back Stage integrity, complemented by targeted Impression Management and Audience Segregation, underscores their adaptability and proficiency in self-governance. This phenomenon suggests that success in the contemporary digital economy increasingly relies on the individual's capacity to become an effective, reflective, and multi-platform Identity Manager.

Acknowledging the foundational nature of this qualitative exploration, several avenues for future research emerge. First, further studies could employ mixed-methods approaches by combining the dramaturgical qualitative findings with quantitative data to assess the correlation between specific impression management strategies (e.g., visual consistency) and objective career outcomes (e.g., income level or client retention rate). Second, given the localized nature of this study in Indonesia, future research should explore cross-cultural variations in dramaturgical performances, particularly comparing Gen Z workers in high-context cultures versus low-context cultures, which may reveal divergent strategies for Audience Segregation and Back Stage preservation. Finally, longitudinal research is needed to investigate the evolutionary trajectory of professional identity; specifically, how these dramaturgical strategies change over time as Gen Z workers transition into senior roles and whether their need for Front Stage performance intensifies or diminishes with increased professional tenure and institutional recognition.

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Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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