

# An Analysis of the Phenomenon of "Collapsing Persona" of Chinese Celebrities through Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

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**Abstract.** In the current context of the rapid development of China's entertainment industry, the creation of a popular celebrity "persona" has become a shortcut for celebrities and their agencies to gain benefits, and celebrities can quickly gain attention and a large number of fans by constructing a "persona". However, with the rapid development of the Internet, the real face behind the celebrity's "persona" is gradually exposed to the public, and the collapse of the celebrity's "persona" is a common occurrence. The phenomenon of the collapse of celebrity "persona" has serious implications at the personal, interactive and social levels, and the communication and sociological logic and issues behind it are worth exploring and reflecting on. Therefore, this paper analyses the causes of the phenomenon and its negative effects from the perspective of Goffman's mimesis theory and makes suggestions and reflections on how to avoid the negative effects brought about by the collapse of celebrities' "personas". The study found that the collapse of celebrities' "persona" was caused by capital guidance from agencies, the uneven quality of the celebrities themselves, the rapid development of the Internet, the alienation of symbolic consumption, and the addition of fan groups to the drama class. The collapse of a celebrity's "persona" will in turn have a negative impact on these factors, not only affecting the circulation and reproduction of capital, but also deeply affecting the role perception and cultural identity of fans and society at large, fostering a negative social climate and hindering social progress and development. Therefore, in order to eliminate this phenomenon, the entire drama class needs to work together, with stars, agencies, the media, the public, especially fans and the government, and other rights holders sharing their respective social responsibilities to build a good entertainment culture and a healthy popular culture.

**Keywords:** Celebrities; Personan; Persona collapse; Frontstage; Backstage; Performance.

## 1. Introduction

"Persona" refers to the setting of a character's image, which originally refers to the author's setting of the character's family, appearance, personality, dress and appearance in novels, movies and anime works [1]. With the rise of entertainment culture and the development of new media technology, the term "persona" has gradually become associated with celebrities, and celebrities and their agencies maintain their survival and development in the entertainment industry by constructing "personas" and other impression management methods. As a product of social construction, "celebrity persona" is widely used on the Internet, and the concept of "collapsing celebrity persona" has come into the public eye. New media technology has brought celebrities closer to the public, which has undoubtedly increased the risk of their "persona collapse", as celebrities may inadvertently reveal their true state, and when their true state does not match the "persona" they have built up, there is a risk of The phenomenon of "collapsing personas" occurs when the real state of affairs does not match the "persona" they have constructed.

In recent years, such as the arrest of the piano prince Li Yundi for prostitution, which led to the collapse of his image as a "virtuous artist"; the arrest of the top actor Wu Yifan for alleged rape, which led to the collapse of his image as a "male god"; the collapse of the famous actor Zhai Tianlin's image as an "academic bully" due to his academic forgery; and the explosion of the musical genius Hua Chenyu for having children before marriage, which greatly affected his image as a shy, unworldly person. The different performances of celebrities on the "front stage" of different shows, such as variety shows, interviews and online media, i.e. the "persona" they build up in front of the public, often differ significantly from their real performance in the backstage of the show, i.e. in real life.

The collapse of the "persona" of many celebrities has not only tarnished the reputation of the celebrities themselves and caused a public outcry but has also had a profound impact on the values and social perceptions of fans and young people, hindering the development of Chinese society. Such phenomena have attracted widespread academic attention and deserve in-depth study and research. Past research has focused on the construction and maintenance of celebrity 'personas', this article will use case studies and theoretical analysis to analyse the causes and effects of the collapse of celebrities' personas and provide suggestions on how to avoid the negative effects of the collapse, based on the "performance frame" and "impression management" in Goffman's theory of mimesis, the concept of "contextual definition" in symbolic interaction theory, Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption and other related theories. They choose to 'give' what they want to be seen in order to manipulate others' perceptions of themselves [2]." It is hoped that this study will enrich the theoretical findings on the "collapse of persona" and provide critical reflections on the dissipation of the phenomenon of "collapsing persona" of celebrities.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Mimesis theory, also known as drama theory, is an important theory developed by the American sociologist Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. He introduces the symbolic interaction theory originating from George Mead and others, as well as elements of drama, into the micro-sociological analysis and study of everyday self-presentation, viewing interactions between people as self-disclosure and performance art. Traditional sociological analyses only emphasised the constraints imposed on individuals by social norms but neglected the range of actions taken by individuals in the process of achieving social expectations. Goffman's mimesis theory, on the other hand, provides insight into the microscopic mechanisms by which social expectations are realised through the analysis of individuals' performance in a situation. In this paper, the study and analysis of the phenomenon of the "collapsing persona" of Chinese celebrities are mainly based on Goffman's mimesis theory. The mimesis theory can be divided into two parts: performance framing and impression management. In addition, the concept of "contextual definition" in the theory of symbolic interaction, which is founded by G. H. Mead, and Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption can help in the analysis of the causes and effects of the phenomenon of the "collapsing persona" of Chinese celebrities.

### 2.1. Dramaturgical Theory

#### 2.1.1 Performance Framework

Goffman argues that people interact in their everyday self-presentation according to the framework of performance in the theatre. The performance framework consists of many elements; the script, the performance, the troupe and the performance area are all integral to a perfect play.

The script is the element in theatre that precedes the performance, and behind the actions of the individual (the actor) lies a powerful playwright - a social system - where people's actions are defined by a pre-written 'script'. The essence of this is the 'scripted expectation', which consists of the social norms that define the roles of various social positions, the expectations of other actors and the expectations of the audience. Whether it is the social norms, the expectations of the actors themselves, or the expectations of other actors and audiences, these scripted expectations are primarily derived from the social system.

Goffman defines "performance" as "all activities of a particular participant that affect any other participant in any way, on a particular occasion [3]." Everyone is a performer. A performer may believe in his or her performance quite sincerely, or he or she may not believe in it and do it for others to see. These two attitudes may switch, especially the latter, and over time may believe it themselves. Depending on the individual's performance, the people who react to the individual's performance may be referred to as the audience. A particular pattern of behaviour that is followed throughout the performance is called a 'role' or 'routine' [3].

The troupe, or acting troupe, denotes any group of people who collaborate with each other in the performance of the same routine [4]. The troupe is not associated with a social structure or social organisation; It performs in order to maintain the definition of a specific situation, which means that when it leaves a specific situation, the troupe loses its meaning of existence. Therefore, it requires interdependence and a clear division of labour between its members, each of whom has a different role to play in the performance. The troupe is a simple addition of individual performers who express not only their own characteristics but also the relationships between the members and the characteristics of the work being performed [5].

The stage is the area and place where actors perform and are divided into a front stage and a backstage. This area of the performance is referred to by Goffman as the 'front stage', where an individual performs at a specific time, presenting a certain situation to the audience, with the help of standard, regular settings and props. The first is the set, which is necessary for the actor to perform and without which the actor cannot perform [6]. The second is personal appearance, which consists of both personal appearance and mannerisms, which are "signs that play a role in telling people about the performer's social status" [7]. Demeanour is "a sign that plays a role in telling people the role the performer plays in the interaction" [7]. Goffman argues that the foreground tends to be constructed, institutionalised and modeled for different contexts [6]. For this reason, "when an individual fills a constructed role, he (or she) is usually found to have a particular foreground already set up" [7]. Foregrounds tend to be chosen rather than created by the actor.

The backstage is the part of the stage that is out of sight and has restricted access to both the audience and outsiders. The backstage is usually adjacent to the frontstage but is distinct from each other. On the front stage, the person presents the socialised self, while backstage, the person presents the spontaneous, most essential parts of the self. In self-performance, the actor has to keep the backstage secret to prevent the audience from untimely intrusion. If the audience intrudes backstage, then backstage becomes frontstage, that is to say, frontstage for a different performance. Goffman argues that sociologists have to observe how people transform from backstage to frontstage [6].

### 2.1.2 Impression Management

Impression management is the different responses individuals make in response to different social situations and social objects, with the aim of creating the desired impression of themselves in the minds of others. Alternatively, when people observe them, they manipulate others' impressions of themselves through outward appearances such as gestures and mannerisms. In terms of impression management analysis, celebrities need to behave appropriately in their daily social performances to achieve the image prescribed by their 'persona'. There are three tendencies in this process.

Idealised performance is the disguise of actions that are inconsistent with socially accepted values, norms and standards and the display of actions that are consistent with socially accepted values, norms and standards. Displaying an idealised face implies, above all, a degree of masking. Goffman has said that the performer will conceal or partially conceal activities, facts and motives that are inconsistent with his own idealised image [6]. All social events and social actions have this element of deliberate acting, i.e. of displaying an idealised image. Goffman argues that people often try to present their own idealised image in front of the stage and, therefore, inevitably need to hide something in their performance [6]. Once a celebrity's 'persona' is confirmed, there is a tendency in social performance to appeal to the values behind the 'persona'. In order to achieve the idealised effect, behaviour that is inconsistent with the standards of the character must be discarded or concealed [8].

As a mystifying performance, by creating a 'social distance' between himself and the audience, the actor can create an awe-inspiring image for the audience and also prevent them from questioning the performance. Here again, Goffman points out that the audience is also drawn into this process, and they themselves often cooperate with the performer in this act in a respectful way [6]. The star needs to maintain a certain distance from the audience to maintain the mystique in order to reinforce the image created by his or her performance.

As for the remedial performance, impression management is used to deal with unanticipated and unexpected actions such as unintentional movements, untimely intrusions, rudeness, and noise,

among others, that can lead to inconsistent performances. Goffman proposes four remedies for this. The first is a preventive measure used by the performer to remedy his or her performance, which includes dramatic loyalty (a high degree of in-group allegiance to avoid cast members identifying with the audience), cast literacy (the actor remembers his or her role, avoids faults, maintains self-control and handles facial expressions and vocal tone during the performance), and dramatic rules (deciding in advance the best way to approach the performance and planning all aspects of it); the second is a remedy used by the audience or outsiders to help the performer remedy his or her performance, the most important of which is sophistication, which includes avoiding backstage, turning a blind eye to the performer's negligence, and being tolerant of novices; the third is the measures that the performer must also take to enable the audience or outsiders to use those protections for the sake of the performance. Firstly, the performer must be good at taking cues from the audience. Secondly, when the performer needs to misrepresent facts, he must act according to a specific etiquette so that the audience can find an excuse for him; the fourth is deliberate neglect on the part of the audience. The audience will consciously ignore the performer's failures in order to go along with the completion of the performance [6].

### **3. Frontstage Performance and Backstage Exposure: An Analysis of the Causes of the "Collapsing Persona" Phenomenon**

#### **3.1. The "Persona" does not Match the Reality Forcing the Performance to be Interrupted**

The reason why celebrity 'personas' does not match reality is that there are some problems in the process of building and maintaining a celebrity 'persona'. First of all, the construction of a celebrity's persona is not under the control of the celebrity himself or herself, but rather the decision belongs to the troupe of the celebrity, i.e. the agency. With the development of the cultural industry, entertainment culture has become commoditised. Agencies over-consume stars and create a 'persona' of the star that is in line with social expectations for marketing purposes. In a sense, celebrities are also consumers and defined, and their 'personas' have become products of the cultural industry. Capital has no patience for the long-term training of stars and only wants to make a few stars popular quickly, without regard for the moral quality and strength of the stars. As a result, the "persona" of the star, as a product of symbolic consumption, is, to a large extent, significantly different from the real situation of the star, and thus, there is a greater risk of collapse. Secondly, it is important that stars understand and accept the social expectations and attitudes represented by their 'personas'. The fundamental purpose of a celebrity's idealised performance through the construction of a 'persona' is to cater to public demand and gain more traffic. Once the reality of the star contrasts with the 'persona', meaning that the performer fails to present their idealised self perfectly, it is difficult to carry on with the performance. Finally, to maintain the 'persona' they have constructed, celebrities will inevitably hide and conceal aspects of themselves that do not match their 'persona'. However, inconsistencies between the many actions taken to maintain the 'persona' can lead to the collapse of the celebrity's 'persona'. For example, Jin Dong, a famous Chinese actor, has made his 'persona' of being 'educated' and 'an elite scholar' popular by quoting famous people on his Weibo and claiming that he loves reading books. In an interview with Youjia Pictorial in August 2016, he said that he reads small articles by Nobel Prize winners in mathematics before going to bed, but in fact, the Nobel Prize does not include mathematics. In addition, a photo of Jin Dong reading at the airport posted on Weibo was also revealed to be a posed photo. In the photo, Jin Dong is sitting on a chair in the airport lobby, reading from a paperback book, while his agent stands behind him with a camera taking pictures of him. These actions raised doubts among netizens about his image as an "academic elite", and Jin Dong's "persona" as an academic collapsed. The reason for this is that he is a performer, and his frontstage "persona" clashes with his real personality backstage.

### **3.2. Blurring of the Boundaries between Front and Backstage Accelerates the End of the Show**

To maintain good impression management, stars need to keep a certain distance from the audience, making sense of mystery and even performing the necessary mystification when appropriate [4]. The line between the front-of-house and the back-of-house performances should be clear, but with the rapid development of the internet and new media, Social situations are intersecting, and the line between front and backstage is blurred [9]. In terms of symbolic consumption theory, celebrities are a commodity, and their 'persona' is the symbolic value behind them. People not only consume the works of celebrities but also the symbolic system and values they represent [10]. The collapse of the celebrity's "persona" is a manifestation of the alienation of symbolic consumption, and the media is both a co-conspirator and a producer of symbolic consumption, and its involvement in making the public dominated by the symbols directly shortens the social distance between the public and the celebrity. Through the Internet, society in general and fans, in particular, can get to know and discover the part of a celebrity's true "face" that is hidden in the background. Social media, represented by microblogging, has created a more direct way for fans to get in touch with celebrities. Reality shows and other entertainment media have also exposed the private lives of celebrities. As a result, the space in the foreground has been squeezed, and the space in the background has been enlarged, and if there are inappropriate actions in the background, the whole 'show' will be ruined, and negative news such as drug use and prostitution will directly lead to the collapse of the 'persona' built up by the celebrities [9]. For example, Xi Mengyao, a famous model, was extremely difficult and impolite on a reality show, and the audience unanimously agreed that this did not fit with her image of "gambling family's daughter-in-law", which led to the collapse of her "persona"; Ouyang Nana, a Taiwanese star, was a sunny "sister next door" on variety shows and vlog videos, but she was caught by the media smoking a cigarette and swearing, and her vulgar behaviour was circulated on the internet, shocking the public and causing her sunny and positive "persona" to collapse. This shows that the development of the Internet has shortened the distance between the public and the celebrities, transforming a large part of the backstage of the celebrities into the frontstage, accelerating the termination of the show and the collapse of the "persona".

### **3.3. The Inclusion of Fan Groups in the Drama Class Increases the Risk of Performance**

The contemporary model of star-making is very different from that of the past. In the past, the birth of a star could not be achieved without the accumulation of long-term training and excellent works, whereas in contemporary society, stars are created for a short period of time through the construction of a "persona" and other star-making methods, and those who are unknown become public figures in the entertainment industry. In this thrilling leap, fans play a crucial role. Fans are the admirers or followers of stars and often have a relationship of admiration, fascination and imitation with them [10]. However, with the development of China's monopolistic entertainment system and the Internet, fan groups are not only the recipients and consumers of celebrity 'personas' but also the participants and planners of the process of constructing celebrity 'personas'. They also play an important role in the process of constructing, maintaining and collapsing celebrity personas. Stars and their agency teams use the preferences and needs of their fan base as the main basis for constructing their personas and transform them as their fan base's 'tastes' change. However, the inclusion of fans in the drama class can pose a huge challenge to the agency team. If the fan base and the financial team are at odds and hostile to each other there is a serious threat, which can exacerbate the risk of the star act collapsing. In addition, there may be different biases among fans, and isolated or even conflicting cliques, which can also have an impact on celebrity performances if their demands conflict with each other [4]. Therefore, a celebrity's 'persona' can collapse overnight, inextricably linked to the inclusion of fan groups in the drama class and that the 'persona' they have created themselves is more easily overturned. For example, Yang Zi, a famous Chinese child actress, was caught between her fan base and her agency when her fans were unhappy with her agency's decision to take on a new drama called "Shen Xiang Ru Ru Crumb", resulting in a massive conflict and boycott, while her

agency insisted on her participation. Her "persona collapsed", and she suffered from online violence, which seriously affected the development of his acting career.

#### **4. The Negative Impact of the "Collapsing Persona" Phenomenon of Chinese Celebrities**

Goffman points out that when individuals perform on a daily basis, they are always projecting a situational definition, consciously or unconsciously. When an individual's performance goes awry, resulting in an image that contradicts the image in the audience's mind, people suffer on three levels of social reality: individual, interactive and social. The collapse of a celebrity's 'persona' has a negative impact on the celebrity themselves, the circle they live in, the social order and society at large to varying degrees.

##### **4.1. Individual Level**

Establishing a 'persona' is a means for celebrities to manipulate their image in the public's mind, and as such, it is closely related to the business resources and development prospects available to them. Once a star's 'persona' collapses, i.e. the backstage of a performance is exposed, it will not only damage the image that the star has worked so hard for but also leave a bad impression in the public mind, leading to lose public trust and damage their reputation. It can also result in huge financial losses and loss of career development resources and opportunities, in the form of fans "losing fans", termination of contracts with endorsed brands and restrictions on acting activities. For example, on 12 September 2017, Li Yutong posted on Weibo a series of incidents in which the famous Chinese singer Xue Zhiqian cheated on her money and feelings, which led to Xue being caught up in the whirlwind of public opinion and his perennial "persona" collapsing overnight. There is a voice of the public: "I do not believe in love anymore". A number of brands that Xue Zhiqian endorsed have subsequently withdrawn their advertisements, leaving him facing advertising losses and huge claims. He has been forced to remove all footage from various television programmes, and putting his career in crisis.

##### **4.2. Interactive Level**

On an interactive level, the audience tends to take the image presented by the performer during the performance as the performer's true self and to see the performer as a true representative of the work organisation, the social group to which he belongs. Moreover, after watching a performance, the audience will take the individual's ability to perform as evidence of his own ability, or even his ability to perform any routine procedure [11]. When a celebrity's 'persona' collapses, the reputation of the celebrity, the films and dramas in which he or she has previously performed, the agency he or she works for, the advertising products he or she endorses, and even the reputation of the circles to which he or she belongs, such as the entertainment industry, can be damaged and questioned to varying degrees by the public. The collapse of Zhai Tianlin's "persona" as an academic has affected not only his acting career but also the reputation and interests of his PhD supervisor and school. Even the professionalism of academics has been questioned by all sectors of society and the public. For example, the famous Chinese actor Wu Xiubo, while maintaining his "perfect uncle" persona, Wu founded 6 holding and 10 affiliated companies and reaped both fame and fortune. However, after the collapse of his "persona", all his businesses and related companies were in crisis.

##### **4.3. Social Level**

Goffman points out that society requires everyone to have some control over what they really think and to only outwardly behave and behave in ways that are socially accepted as right. This social norm is in fact social front, a rule that people have to follow in order to survive in society and a necessary element to maintain social stability [11]. On the one hand, the "persona" of a celebrity is the social "role" played by the celebrity; behind each role, there is a fixed system of social norms and ethical

values, and the celebrity needs to perform according to the established norms of these social roles in order to maintain the sound operation of the social order. On the other hand, as public figures, celebrities have an exemplary and leading role to play, and they should be the object of public admiration, imitation and learning, representing the values of society. Studies have found that the collapse of celebrity 'personas' in contemporary society is either due to the failure of capital 'persona' positioning or the failure of celebrity impression management, but more often due to the collapse of celebrities' disregard for social norms, constantly touching the bottom line of the public and disturbing social order and morality. For example, famous Canadian-Chinese actor Wu Yifan sentenced to 13 years in prison and deported for rape, international superstar Jackie Chan's son Fang Zuming was criminally detained for drug abuse, and International superstar Fan Bingbing penalised RMB883 million for tax evasion. On the other hand, they also undermine the positive role models of celebrities, causing young people immersed in the new media environment to become recipients of a negative culture, affecting the correct shaping of their three outlooks, and depriving fan groups of their emotional support and identity, causing serious negative social impacts.

## 5. Strategies and Recommendations

Studies have shown that the collapse of the celebrity's "persona" has produced different degrees of negative impacts on three levels: personal, interactive and social. To counteract the negative effects of the collapse of celebrities' personas, maintain a healthy social order and cleanse the entertainment industry of undesirable practices, need to start with the various actors involved in the construction and maintenance of celebrities' personas. Therefore, this paper proposes the following strategies and suggestions.

Firstly, When building a "persona" and packaging a star, the agency should not only pay attention to social expectations and market demand, but also pay attention to the long-term cultivation of the star's strength and moral quality and other aspects of comprehensive quality. The entertainment industry should have a high threshold for selecting stars and should not be driven by capital to put the cart before the horse and promote stars whose moral character is not worthy of their position, thus disrupting the atmosphere and social order of the entertainment industry. The agency should not be the dominant player in the development of the stars, but should act as a facilitator, helping the stars to complete their frontstage performances, controlling the social distance between the stars and the public, promptly prodding and reminding the stars of their status as performers, and creating a perfect value system and career plan for the stars rather than choosing the wrong "persona" for them. Secondly, the stars should set and face up to their own position, take up their responsibilities and obligations as public figures in society, putting their artistic achievement and public recognition rather than fame and fortune as the goal to strive for, and validate their own abilities with excellent works. They should always adapt to their "persona" and be responsible for it, strive to improve their professionalism and moral cultivation, be flexible and comfortable with idealised, mystified and remedial performances, be careful with their words and behaviour, and exert the power of role models. The power of example. Thirdly, celebrities need to learn to reconcile the contradictions between themselves and their socialised selves and to understand and accept their own 'persona', not to build a "persona" that is far away from their real personality, to be realistic, to face the public with their real face and behaviour, to maintain their "persona" while doing a good job, and to present the public with an image that has both personality and ability. Fourthly, fans and the public should understand that celebrities are also ordinary people and no one is perfect. The correct choice is to be tolerant, dialectical and rational about celebrity 'personas'; Fifthly, the government should improve relevant laws and regulations, increase market supervision, promote in-depth comprehensive governance in the field of culture and entertainment, strengthen the construction of a culture of social justice and the rule of law, and make positive contributions to the creation of a positive and righteous culture and art ecology; Sixthly, media reports should not be broad-brush, using the performance of unethical artists to evaluate all artists; there are still some virtuous artists who exist and use their strength to

produce good There are still some virtuous artists who use their strength to produce good works. The media should give more coverage and attention to positive artists.

In short, the key to avoiding the collapse of a star's 'persona' lies in the collaborative performance of the star's troupe, which works together to ensure the success of the performance. A troupe is a collection of individuals, unrelated to a social structure or organization, who work together to maintain a particular contextual definition. In a narrower sense, a celebrity is in the closest set of theatre group relationships with their agency team and family members, collaborating with each other to maintain a specific impression of their persona to the audience; in a broader sense, the entire entertainment industry that the celebrity is a part of a larger theatre group that shares a common internal quest to unite in front of an audience and maintain a given persona performance [2]. The successful conclusion of a show is, therefore, the result of the combined efforts of the various drama class subjects, including the star, the agency and the fan base.

## 6. Conclusion

This article uses Goffman's mimetic drama theory to analyse the causes and effects of the collapse of celebrities' "personas" in contemporary society. It is found that the guidance of capital such as agencies, the uneven quality of the stars themselves, the rapid development of the Internet, the alienation of symbolic consumption, and the inclusion of fan groups in the drama class are the main factors that lead to the collapse of the stars' "persona". The collapse of a celebrity's 'persona' will, in turn, have a negative impact on these factors, not only affecting the circulation and reproduction of capital but also deeply affecting the role perception and cultural identity of fans and society at large, fostering a negative social climate and hindering social progress and development. However, celebrities are also ordinary people who have been cloaked and labelled by the media, and the collapse of their 'persona' is a normal phenomenon under the rapid development of society and will gradually be recognised and accepted by people. In his book *Self-Presentation in Everyday Life*, Irving Goffman suggests that the performance and interaction of people in everyday life is a game, a process in which a certain "definition" is successful or successfully accepted by people, and that successful impression management requires the cooperation of the entire cast. Therefore, in order to eliminate the collapse of celebrity 'persona', it is necessary to collectively involve the celebrities themselves, their agencies, fans, and the media. The government should actively take up their social responsibilities, regulate the 'persona' of celebrities, create a good environment for popular culture and promote the healthy development of the entertainment industry. Only through the unity of art and people can the charisma of celebrities be sustained.

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