Food discourse: ethics and aesthetics on Instagram

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the study is threefold: understanding the interconnections amongst visual and verbal multimodal communication strategies used in food discourse; identifying the themes of celebrity chef’s food discourse with respect to pro-environmental behaviour; and providing a methodological framework to visually analyse food-themed videos.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses mise-en-scène and critical discourse and multimodal analyses to gain insights on food discourse from 20 videos shared by a Michelin starred chef on social media platforms.

Findings – Results show that a pro-environmental cooking philosophy challenges the normative discourse on food and educates general audiences and foodies alike. Mise-en-scène and discourse analyses of Instagram visual content reveal that leftovers are central to the ethical message and are intertwined – through the aesthetic of the videos-with concepts of inclusivity, diversity and nourishment.

Practical implications – Chefs, and restaurants, are encouraged to recognise their responsibility as role models, thus able to influence the societal production of food discourse.

Originality/value – The findings provide new insights into the role of a celebrity chef in promoting sustainable food preparation and consumption.

Keywords Celebrity chefs, Social media, Food waste, Discourse analysis, Visual methods

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Discourse is powerful for its influence on individual behaviour and its societal effects (Foucault, 2007). Along with texts (Cole, 2008), visuals play a dominant role in discourse formation. For its aesthetic content, public discourse related to food exploits visuals to enhance impact on viewers’ (Murtarelli et al., 2021). As outlined in recent research, food consumption practices are easily displayed visually (Pera et al., 2022). From everyday food practices to celebrity chefs, Instagram provides a platform for visual and textual food discourse.

Instagram allows to explore the interconnections between visual and verbal communication strategies. In this respect, celebrity chefs’ play a role model, and their discourse can shape individuals’ food preparation and consumption habits (Lane and Fisher, 2015). Perceived as ambassadors of “gastrodipomacy” (Suntikul, 2019), celebrity chefs are recognised as key players in food politics (Giusmpasoglou et al., 2020) and are often involved in campaigns to promote sustainable food habits (Batat, 2020). As social learning theory posits, imitation of role models leads to behavioural changes (Bandura, 1977); it is thus foreseeable that chefs can stimulate pro-environmental behaviours such as food waste avoidance.

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Food waste, in restaurants and at home, is a dominant issue in current discourses about the future of food (Yeong et al., 2021); and responsible food consumption is a desirable pro-environmental behaviour (Andrews et al., 2018). Social media platforms give chefs the opportunity to construct and disseminate their food discourse and to stimulate reflection on sustainable consumption. Symbols and meanings within food discourses have been critically deconstructed and (re)constructed on Instagram, generating discussions on what “local” and “authentic” food actually is (de Jong and Varley, 2017), and shifting the focus from food for survival to food for self-improvement (Patterson et al., 2019).

Yet, little is known about food discourse on visual social media and its possible contribution to food waste reduction. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring one celebrity chef’s food discourse on Instagram. This paper explores visual and textual modalities of a chef’s discourse around leftovers. The aim of this research is threefold: (1) to understand the interconnections amongst visual and verbal multimodal communication strategies used in food discourse (2) to identify the themes of a celebrity chef’s food discourse with respect to pro-environmental behaviour; and (3) to provide a methodological framework to visually analyse food-themed videos.

In light of these issues, the next section offers a brief overview of relevant past research. On one side it focusses on celebrity chefs, showing their relevance as role models and, on the other, discusses literature on normative discourses on social media and their ability to stimulate viewers’ social responsibility. The methodological section presents the subject of this study and the visual methods of analysis employed, providing a replicable procedure to analyse video content. Findings and discussion are then presented, mise-en-scene and multimodal discourse analysis reveal the aesthetic and ethic dimension of the chef’s discourse on food and leftovers. In the conclusions, the theoretical and practical implications are presented aiming at stimulating future research on food, social media and pro-environmental behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1 Celebrity chefs: role models and ambassadors

Chefs have “finely tuned” palates (Pratten, 2003, p. 458), excel in culinary knowledge and techniques, and possess leadership qualities (Batat, 2020; Henderson, 2011). Awards are significant achievements in the sector, greatly boosting the prestige chefs and restaurants (Batat, 2020; Pratten, 2003). Individual chefs are also known for their personal cooking style and creativity, leveraged to gain competitive advantage and to create unique communication strategies (Lee and Tao, 2021; Murtarelli et al., 2021; Presenza and Petruzzelli, 2020). For the purpose of this research, celebrity chefs are defined as exceptionally talented and popular chefs who are considered as role models for food aficionados, food tourists and society at large. Indeed, some celebrity chefs are internationally recognised as role models due to their social media and television exposure and their ability to influence consumer behaviour (Lane and Fisher, 2015; Henderson, 2011). As Presenza and Petruzzelli (2020) point out, communication on different traditional media and social media platforms is essential to showcase the chefs’ cooking philosophies and the novelty and creativity of proposed dishes. In fact, haute cuisine dishes are often considered to be artworks, and chefs are idolised as artists for their innovative culinary design, their vast knowledge and experience in creating signature dishes (Wu et al., 2022). On Instagram, celebrity chefs share opinions and construct cultural and symbolic discourses on food. Widely considered to be role models, when chefs adopt sustainable food practices, and healthy and ethical eating behaviours, they can influence others (Mapes and Ross, 2022). While chefs perform and practice their own unique cooking philosophies, they are also “culinary ambassadors” (Suntikul, 2019, p. 1084) and the discourses they construct around food influence consumers’ appreciation of national and regional cuisines.
2.2 Normative discourse on food consumption

Discourse around fine-dining is consonant with luxury food consumption. Mapes and Ross (2022, p. 260) argue that chefs refer to concepts like “genuineness, naturalness, egalitarianism and tradition” as lying at the heart of their cooking. Simple but nutritious and high-quality ingredients, like a carrot or a sweet potato, acquire symbolic meaning when prepared by a chef and a role model (Lee and Tao, 2021; Presenza and Petruzzelli, 2019). The use and consumption of fresh, seasonal, local and healthy ingredients give celebrity chefs what Mapes and Ross (2022) call “elite authenticity”. This is seen as the media discourse on what—in contemporary society—is considered “authentic” food and on the use of markers of eliteness to construct social status. The symbolic importance and value for consumers is further increased by the construction—through visuals—of the social media discourse around food (Atwal et al., 2019; Murtarelli et al., 2021).

As expected, food waste and leftovers are often omitted from this normative discourse or characterised as elements that need to be reduced and managed in restaurants and hospitality services (Batat, 2020; Yeong et al., 2021). As Mourad (2016) has said food waste is a highly politicised issue linked to the social, economic and environmental sustainability of our current food system. Indeed, prevention of food waste is the dominant research theme to be reached through changing consumers’ behaviour (see, e.g. Haque et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Experience and prior research show that when individuals eat leftovers, they are doing so to save time and energy, rarely seeing it as a pleasurable, let alone hedonistic, eating experience (Andrews et al., 2018). That leftovers are perceived negatively comes as no surprise, for a variety of reasons, especially in contrast to the fresh luxury food prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. Moreover, leftovers are not included in the aesthetically appealing visual discourses constructed on social media platforms. In this paper, an alternative discourse around food leftovers is identified by an investigation of the multimodal food discourse constructed on Instagram.

3. Methodology

To explore food discourse on Instagram videos, multimodal data (visual and verbal) are examined using an interpretative paradigm (Chambers, 2012; Mapes and Ross, 2022; Volo and Irimiás, 2021). Visual and verbal data were collected from the public Instagram account and YouTube channel of chef Massimo Bottura. This choice is justified by: (1) the chef’s popularity, (2) his pro-environmental discourse on food, and (3) the innovative content of the broadcasting (recipient of the Webby Award in 2020). Massimo Bottura is a three-Michelin starred Italian chef. In business since the beginning of 1980, he is consistently listed amongst the world’s best chefs and in 2019 he was amongst the TIME 100 most influential people. His restaurant Osteria Francescana is located in Modena (Italy) and has been voted as the World’s Best Restaurant in 2016 and 2018. Bottura is a UN Environmental Program Goodwill Ambassador and founder of different social projects: Tortellante which provides autistic people real job opportunities, and the non-profit organisation Food for Soul. His Refettorios are community kitchens in different cities around the world to support people in vulnerable situations.

Bottura’s Instagram profile has 1.5 million followers, and his videos are also available on YouTube. His “Kitchen Quarantine” videos were selected for analysis, these were live-streamed on Instagram every evening at 8 p.m. (GMT+2) from 13 March to 23 May 2020, during Italy’s very long COVID-19 lockdown. Since Instagram does not allow viewers to save all live-streamed episodes the publicly available episodes uploaded to Bottura’s YouTube channel were also collected (see Appendix). Discourse analysis, which has already been used to explore video content (e.g. Yan and Santos, 2009), is appropriate for interpreting verbal, visual and contextual elements (discourse and sociocultural practices). The collected episodes
were assessed for overall suitability, and selected scenes were examined using mise-en-scène (Rose, 2016), multimodal and critical discourse analyses (Fairclough, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021).

### 3.1 Mise-en-scène constituents and analysis
Mise-en-scène in videos refers to the spatial and temporal organisation of content within a shot frame (Rose, 2016). The videos’ titles and time release were collected and their different units – shot, sequence and scene – examined. Significant scenes were identified and used to create a dataset of 200 screenshots; these choices are considered appropriate for visual analysis (Rose, 2016; Zappavigna, 2020). The mise-en-scène elements (Rose, 2016) analysed in this study are: screen ratio (Instagram videos default 9:16); frame (open/closed); shot distance (extreme long, long, three-quarters, medium, head and shoulders or close-up); focus (deep/shallow); angle (overhead, high-angle, eye-level or low-angle); composition (information value: left/right, top/bottom, centre/margin); colour values (light/dark, high/low).

### 3.2 Multimodal and critical discourse analysis
Multimodal and critical discourse analysis (MCDA) investigates different communication modalities – visual, verbal and contextual – to discover the ways in which these convey meaning and persuade audiences (Fairclough, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021). MCDA enables researchers to analyse the convergence of social actors’ verbal, representational and interactive meaning production. This analysis is rooted in different disciplinary areas (linguistic to analyse verbal analysis, art and semiotics in the case of images) and accords equal importance to all the components adopting a unifying approach to meaning-making, within a social and temporal frame (Kress, 2013). In food marketing studies, this method has been used to explore communication strategies to promote organic candy and the ethical issues raised by this product (Fernández-Váquez, 2021) and to reflect on the social science discourses about veganism (Cole, 2008). This paper proposes the application of MCDA to videos.

The analysis focussed on the production and interpretation of meaning by identifying discursive (spoken language and visual clues) statements and their social contexts (interaction with audiences, gestures, tones of voice and proxemics). In the collected data – monologues, dialogues, real-time interactions and cooking instructions – the chef spoke both in English and Italian. Interrelations – within and across videos – were identified, patterns recognised, and emerging themes established. Discourse analysis elements (Rose, 2016) used in this study are: (1) discursive statement for the production of meaning; and (2) the statements’ social context: interaction with audiences, who is saying what and under what circumstances. Underpinned by social learning theory, the analysis focussed on two aspects: discourse as an integrated way to reason about and constitute the social world, and the power of discourse to influence society at large.

### 4. Findings and discussion
#### 4.1 Shaping discourse through visuals
Discourse construction on food preparation and consumption was explored through an examination of the interconnections between visual, verbal and contextual modalities. The results of the mise-en-scène analysis show how videos convey meaning through the construction of a representational process.

Technology determines body language and influences the scene composition. Instagram videos have a vertical screen ratio (9:16), which directs viewers’ attention towards the chef’s gestures, and thus the action. The analysis reveals that closed frames and medium shot
distances give audiences the best sense of details of dinner preparation and stimulate emotional connections. Table 1 shows selected results from the mise-en-scène analysis and snippets of the dialogues.

4.2 Visual discourse demystifies elitism

Discourse analysis proves the interconnection of visual, verbal and interactive aspects that make the relationship between the chef and his viewers an informal one. Bottura wears pyjamas, thereby signalling the intimacy of the space; gestures and language register are informal, the tone of voice is always friendly. Conviviality, the quintessence of any food experience, is enhanced through cameos with family members and the verbal clues: “It is not a master class, it is not a cooking show, it is just us, making dinner.”

In video 6, *Leftovers, featuring Grilled Cheese and Sautéed Spinach*, for example, this relaxed conviviality is affirmed by the clothes worn by the chef and his family members. The episode opens with the chef standing next to the fridge. He is wearing a pair of jeans and a white Gucci sweater with the words: “Common sense is not that common” printed across his chest. The other characters are also wearing casual clothes, or pyjamas, an attire with which the audience – during the pandemic lockdown – could identify.

Mise-en-scène and discourse analysis revealed two prominent themes in the Instagram discourse on food: ethic and aesthetic of consumption. These are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video number and title</th>
<th>Screen shot</th>
<th>Frame, shot distance, angle</th>
<th>Extracts from monologues and dialogues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| n. 2. Three Bollito Salad - Kitchen Quarantine 14th March 2020 | ![Frame](image1) | Closed frame Medium shot distance Eye-level angle | - “We have cleaned the whole refrigerator […] we made an old-style mayonnaise for this salad. You see, we manage the fridge like a painter uses the plank, without waste.”
- “Cooking is an act of love and it must marry beauty.” |
| n. 3. Sunday Tortellini – Kitchen Quarantine 15th March 2020 | ![Frame](image2) | Closed frame Medium shot distance Eye-level angle | - “Do not ask me about the recipe, that is a secret. In every family, there is a different recipe. So, tortellini are the secret of a special project that we have with Charlie and the special kids. Tortellini are different one from the other, because the good thing is that every tortellino is handmade with love.”
- “Then we add Parmigiano Reggiano […] this is an edible ode to such timeless delicious ingredient.” |
| n. 6. Leftovers, feat. Grilled Cheese & Sautéed Spinach - Kitchen Quarantine 19th March 2020 | ![Frame](image3) | Closed frame Close-up shot Low-level angle | - “Ask people if they are following what we are doing.”
- “Are you following guys?
- “OK, we have a very special surprise for tonight, but you have to wait. […] You see, we use only leftovers.”
- “You see, this is also about how we can change the world, changing one tiny thing and making it a little bit more beautiful.” |

Table 1. Examples of analysed scenes and related snippets
4.3 The chef’s visual discourse encourages ethical consumption

The first theme, ethics, revolves around the creative use of leftovers, scarcely considered in normative food discourse. Indeed, “humble” ingredients are being placed in a new context, and the chef’s discourse reveals his committed anti-waste stance. Food leftovers become the central ingredients in a fine-dining dish. Served on fine China and compared to the colours of an artist’s palette, these humble ingredients are exalted and transformed into “haute cuisine.” The videos present a socially responsible food discourse within which nourishment, frugality, diversity and inclusion intersect. Handmade tortellini (Table 1) become a metaphor for diversity and inclusion: each one is imperfect and welcomed as such.

In video no. 6, the mise-en-scène analysis reveals that closed frames were used throughout the food preparation. Two-thirds of the video consist of medium and close-up shots and two-thirds of shots are at eye-level angle making viewers feel connected to the chef and allow them to interpret his message. Close shots of the chef also increase the audience’s sense of intimacy. In terms of composition, the chef is at centre of the frame, indicating his importance, but is surrounded by other characters which suggests balance between himself and audiences. The video frames the chef’s energy and his activity in harmony with the surroundings and a constant interaction with both family members and online audience. Social semiotics considers colour to be a mode of communication; it affects the senses and helps to construct social relations. In video no. 6, note that warm colours (red, orange, brown and even dark colours) are employed, these are generally considered stimulating (Rose, 2016). The video is filmed indoor, and the lighting is therefore almost entirely artificial; light tones are created with increasing intensity. The main light is on the chef and fill lights reduce shadow. This lighting style suggests hope, optimism and happiness (Rose, 2016).

Immediately after the opening scene of video no. 6, the camera focuses on the ingredients for dinner: leftovers. The ingredients are visible and are a motivation to create something valuable and memorable. The chef also calls for action (“clean out the fridge and make something new”), suggesting the audience that they can reduce food waste by using imagination and being creative. Visual and verbal stimuli are interconnected in this discourse, the main purpose of which is to stimulate ethical consumption.

Leftovers should not just be heated up – they have the potential of becoming something completely new and delicious! (chef, video no. 6)

Throughout the video images of leftovers and their cooking are woven into the discursive statement of fine-dining. Ennobling humble ingredients constitute symbolic readings which is supported by verbal communication:

We can change a tiny thing by making it a little bit more beautiful. (chef, video no. 6)

The social context of discourse emerges from the interplay between the video’s visual and spoken elements, from the chef’s choice of words, his dialogues with his daughter, and from the interaction with the live-streaming audience. The medium and close-up shot distances elicit empathy with the characters. The analysis of characters’ proxemics reveals the increasing sense of intimacy generated by the video and the audience emotional involvement, symbolised by the “flying heart” icons in most of the shots. The last shot is emblematic: the chef is placing the fine China plates – containing his dishes created with leftovers – on an elegantly set dinner table. In the shot, the contrast between the bright daffodils and the dishes and the low saturation colours is striking (see Table 1). The chef and his family fall silent, giving time and space to reflection.

4.4 The chef’s visual discourse encourages aesthetic and hedonic consumption

The second theme to emerge is the aesthetic. The videos stimulate the audience’s sensory aesthetics by the chefs’ comments on visual arts, poetry, philosophy and arts at large. Fine-
dining dishes are compared to a painter’s palette and elicit aesthetic pleasure and hedonic responses. The celebrity chef’s aesthetic pleasing dishes induce positive feelings. It emerges that, the sensory aesthetics of cooking encompass a range of elements including affective, material and environmental factors and are combined with social and pro-environmental suggestions (the no-waste/re-use philosophy). Mise-en-scène analysis of video no. 2, Three Bollito Salad, shows that closed frames are used throughout the video and three-quarters of the time the shots are medium or close-up. This framing allows a deep focus which is intensified by the high or eye-level angles. Warm lights from a crystal chandelier illuminate the scene. In terms of compositions, the chef stands centre frame, holding a piece of paper with a poet’s quote on it. The use of cool and warm colours in this video is balanced: cool colours are considered to be calming and warm colours stimulating (Rose, 2016).

The episode opens with Bottura wearing an elegant black suit, a Gucci-branded shirt and a hat, in stark contrast to a chef’s usual white uniform. This opening shot introduces the audience into a fashionable, elegant and well curated kitchen. Standing behind the kitchen-island, Bottura reads out an inspirational quote: “Patience is the most heroic of all virtues, because there is nothing heroic about it” (Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi). The scene is imbued with a poetic power and Leopardi’s words both remind the audience about their cultural roots and traditions and – in the midst of the pandemic – this might allude to the comfort and hope of one’s cultural identity. The camera draws viewers’ attention to the harmoniously displayed ingredients: colours, forms and textures recall images of Renaissance artist’s’ atelier – a symbolic representation of art and beauty. The message is reinforced by the chef’s words:

We have cleaned out the whole refrigerator […] we made an old-style mayonnaise for this salad. You see, we manage the fridge like a painter uses the colour palette, without waste. (chef, video no. 2)

All through the scene the chef is centred and surrounded by family members who are watching while he prepares dinner. Visual representation of intimate relationships built on trust and love combine with verbal communication:

Cooking is an act of love and it must marry beauty. (chef, video no. 2)

In the narrative discourse, tradition is meaningful, but the future is action: it needs to be grounded in pro-environmental behaviours. While direct reference to future travel is premature during lockdown, the image of Italy as a land of fashion, art and poetry where beauty is embedded in everyday actions is very much part of the main narrative. Social context of statements refers to the subject of the scene, the chef in dialogue with both the video-maker (his daughter) and with the audience watching the live-streamed event.

A very, very special night … soul kitchen for you. (chef, video no. 2)

The combination of verbal and visual elements produce a compelling performance which delivers both social and cultural messages.

You see, this is also about how we can change the world, changing one tiny thing and by making it little bit more beautiful. (chef, video no. 2)

The general impression of time as frozen – during lockdown – creates the social context for the statements. Although itself a product of a frozen present, Bottura envisions great social mobility in the near future. In the meantime, the smartphone camera leads audiences through the kitchen and a living room adorned with contemporary artworks.

5. Conclusions
Findings show that by using an informal social media communication strategy, celebrity chefs can encourage home-cooking and food waste reduction by raising leftovers value.
Ethics and aesthetics, as vectors of food discourse, are herein rooted in the creative transformation of leftovers. A pro-environmental cooking philosophy challenges the normative discourse on food and educates audiences, foodies and food tourists alike. Individuals who see chefs as role models are motivated to praise food preparation and consumption as acts of care for both body and mind. Ethics in food discourse very often refers to the avoidance of food waste. In this study, the visual and verbal discourse praise leftovers as core of the ethical message and discourse is intertwined with inclusivity, diversity and nourishment through aesthetics. The transformation of leftovers into pleasing and emotionally significant dishes can be seen as a metaphor for responsible human activity.

Social media videos, with their combination of visual and verbal communication strategies, play a significant role in food discourse. Home-cooking and the use of leftovers are portrayed as ethical and aesthetic practices that allow for creative culinary experiences. These results are in line with recent studies (Murtarelli et al., 2021) which recognise the potential of chef’s visual social media communication strategies. In fact, visuals have the capacity to influence the discourse on pro-environmental food preparation and consumption. In addition, this contribution examines the importance of Instagram video discourse as a conveyor of content and meaning about food: Bottura’s videos reflect the progressive political mindset of this ambassador of Italian food who has made ethics and aesthetics – his love for art and beauty – the vector for his business strategy. The discourse illustrates the essence of Italian cuisine, and food experience – the primary narrative element – becomes a vector for ethics and aesthetics.

In line with prior research (Chambers, 2012; Volo and Irimiás, 2021), the interpretative paradigm used here suggests that visual analysis validity is determined by whether or not the research in question provides new and plausible interpretations of a phenomenon.

From a theoretical point of view, this study offers an alternative understanding of information sources that have the potential to inspire individuals to adopt pro-environmental and ethical behaviours. Combined with multimodal critical discourse analysis, it also provides insights into the entanglement of food consumption with cultural and symbolic discourses. Acknowledging the constitutive character of social media (de Jong and Varley, 2017) in purveying meaning through everyday activities, this paper emphasises the importance of the social production of food discourse within the frame of social learning theory. Chefs as role models can trigger pro-environmental behaviours by praising ethics and aesthetics in food preparation and consumption. In addition, aesthetic aspects of visual representation combined with traditional means of communication reinforce the affective, material and environmental elements in food discourse. This adds new perspectives to the literature on food waste discourse and strengthen the interconnectedness of visuals and texts.

From a methodological perspective, this contribution offers a replicable procedure to analyse visuals thus responding to the call of Volo and Irimias (2021) who advocate for more rigorous visual analyses of still and moving images. In particular, this study presents a structured procedure to collect videos and examine their content using mise-en-scène and multimodal discourse analysis. Finally, the research findings have also several practical implications. Restaurants and chefs in particular, are advised to tailor their social media communication in order to raise awareness on food issues and to show commitment towards food waste reduction. Furthermore, chefs – as role models – should endorse food leftovers by praising their potential aesthetic values and should invite viewers to engage in creative cooking that uses kitchen remainders. Food-themed television and social media channels should provide platforms where viewers could display their aesthetically pleasing dishes created using leftovers, thus fostering the discourse on the need for a waste reduction culture.

This study is not free from limitations: the study is conducted on a single unit of observation; future research could investigate other chefs’ discourse on food and sustainable consumption in other cultures. Another limitation of this study is that the analysed videos
were filmed during a specific period, the Italian lockdown in 2020, and thus additional research should be conducted in the future. From the methodological perspective, a selection of specific scenes from the videos was necessary and this inevitably limits the data. Nevertheless, the systematic analysis ensures trustworthiness, it offers valid insights from mise-en-scène and discourse analysis. In addition, the study provides a simple, but effective, framework to visually analyse food-themed videos. Future research might examine the audience viewpoint, in particular the viewers’ evaluation of celebrity chefs’ videos can be investigated to further verify the contribution to the construction of food discourse.

References


### Appendix

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</tr>
</tbody>
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