



“Fellow Bro”: Domestic Competence,  
Gender Boundary Work, and the Social  
Construction of Contemporary Masculinity

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## **“Fellow Bro”: Domestic Competence, Gender Boundary Work, and the Social Construction of Contemporary Masculinity**

### **Abstract**

This article examines a brief humorous exchange in which a man is asked what he calls a woman who pays her own bills, mows the lawn, rakes leaves, cleans gutters, weeds, gardens, performs home repairs, lifts heavy objects, and manages moving tasks. His answer, “fellow bro”, appears casual, comic, and perhaps even complimentary. Yet sociologically, the statement reveals a dense set of assumptions about gender, labour, competence, and masculine recognition in contemporary life. The woman is not simply described as independent, capable, self-sufficient, or competent; rather, her competence is translated into masculinized terms, and she is recognized through symbolic incorporation into brotherhood. Drawing on the doing-gender tradition (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the theory of hegemonic masculinity and its reformulations (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), the literatures on precarious manhood (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and hybrid and inclusive masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Anderson & McCormack, 2018), this article argues that the phrase “fellow bro” illustrates a persistent feature of contemporary masculinity: even as women increasingly perform tasks historically coded as masculine, the cultural grammar through which such competence is recognized often remains organized around masculinity as the privileged sign of autonomy, strength, utility, and practical authority. The joke is therefore not trivial. It reveals the social construction of masculinity as a relational category, sustained through everyday speech, domestic divisions of labour, symbolic boundary work, and the reclassification of women who cross gendered expectations.

**Keywords:** masculinity; gender boundary work; domestic labour; symbolic recognition; hegemonic masculinity; gender performativity; contemporary masculinity

## Introduction

*A man is asked: what do you call a woman who pays her own bills, mows the lawn, rakes leaves, cleans gutters, weeds, gardens, does home repairs, performs heavy lifting, and handles moving tasks? The man replies: “fellow bro.”*

At first glance, the statement appears humorous, relying on surprise, exaggeration, and the incongruity of referring to a woman as a “bro.” However, humour is rarely neutral in sociological analysis. Jokes often condense social anxieties, normalize categories, and reveal the tacit rules by which groups interpret the world. A joke is effective only when its audience already shares the underlying assumption, making a successful punchline evidence of a collectively held belief. The phrase “fellow bro” is sociologically significant because it does not merely describe a woman who is economically independent and practically competent. Instead, it relocates her into a masculine category. Her actions are not interpreted as evidence of expanded femininity, gender-neutral adulthood, or ordinary human capability. Rather, they are understood as indicators that she has entered the symbolic domain associated with men.

The phrase “fellow bro” serves as a point of departure for examining the contemporary social construction of masculinity. Contemporary masculinity is characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, masculinity has become increasingly unstable. Women’s participation in paid labour, home ownership, independent living, physical work, leadership, and technical competence has disrupted longstanding assumptions that men are naturally or exclusively suited to provision, protection, repair, and physical exertion (Risman, 2018; Reeves, 2022). On the other hand, the symbolic value attached to these tasks often remains masculine. When women perform them, they may receive

praise, but this recognition frequently takes the form of masculinization. Such women are described as “one of the guys,” “a boss,” “tough,” “hard,” “built different,” or, in this context, a “fellow bro.”

This article offers a conceptual sociological analysis of a brief humorous vignette. It does not treat the exchange as empirical evidence of a universal social pattern. Rather, it uses the phrase “fellow bro” as an interpretive entry point into broader sociological questions about gender accountability, symbolic recognition, domestic labour, and the cultural coding of competence. The analysis, therefore, examines how everyday language can reveal the persistence of gendered assumptions even in apparently casual or humorous speech.

The central issue is not whether women can occupy these roles, but why their competence often still requires masculine translation. The phrase “fellow bro” suggests that independence, resilience, physical capacity, and practical authority remain culturally coded as masculine, even when performed by women. The remainder of this article develops this claim across several dimensions: gender as accomplishment, masculinity as a relational hierarchy, the gendering of domestic space, the masculinization of female independence, the precariousness of male recognition, prevailing crisis narratives, hybrid and inclusive masculine formations, the cultural form of the “bro,” and the intersectional limits of any single interpretation.

## Gender as a Social Accomplishment

A foundational sociological claim asserts that gender is not merely an inherent characteristic but an enacted process. West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of "doing gender" remains central to this perspective. Gender is produced through recurring social interactions in which individuals are held accountable to culturally intelligible norms of masculinity and femininity. Thus, gender cannot be reduced to biological sex or understood solely as a private identity. Rather, it is an ongoing accomplishment, performed and evaluated within social contexts. The necessity of continual accomplishment allows for the possibility that gender may be misattributed, withheld, or reassigned.

The "fellow bro" remark exemplifies gender accountability in this technical sense. The woman's actions are evaluated against cultural expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for women and men. Activities such as paying bills, repairing the home, mowing the lawn, lifting heavy items, and managing outdoor maintenance are not inherently male. These tasks acquire masculine connotations through social coding. The humour of the remark relies on the audience's recognition that these activities remain culturally associated with men. The woman's performance of these tasks disrupts the expected alignment between womanhood and traits such as dependence, softness, domestic interiority, or passivity. Risman (2018), reframing this insight at the structural level, contends that gender operates simultaneously at individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Even as individuals and institutions evolve, interactional expectations may persist and continue to regulate conduct. The remark thus represents a lingering interactional expectation made explicit.

Instead of permitting this disruption to redefine the category of womanhood, the man's response maintains the symbolic order by reclassifying the woman as a "bro." This constitutes an act of boundary management. While the woman's competence is recognized, the gender order remains unaltered because the qualities being praised are still regarded as masculine. She is not simply a woman performing these tasks; rather, her actions render her socially legible as masculine. Schippers (2007) articulates the underlying mechanism in her account of gender hegemony: masculinity and femininity are constructed as a hierarchical and complementary pair. Qualities such as authority, physical strength, and agency are coded as masculine because their relational counterparts, deference, fragility, and passivity, are coded as feminine. A woman who embodies the former set of traits vacates the feminine pole and becomes intelligible only in relation to the masculine.

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further develops this analysis. Gender is not a stable essence expressed through action; instead, it is constituted through repeated acts that reference and reproduce social norms. From this perspective, activities such as mowing the lawn or repairing the home do not inherently express masculinity. These acts acquire masculine meaning because they are consistently associated with male bodies, male responsibility, and male authority within cultural narratives. The humour of the "fellow bro" remark relies on the reiteration of these norms. It highlights that gender categories require continuous reproduction due to their inherent instability, and that each act of reproduction, including a casual joke, presents an opportunity for deviation.

**Masculinity as Relational and Hierarchical:** Masculinity is not only an individual identity. It is relational, constructed in relation to femininity, to other masculinities, and to institutional arrangements. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity is helpful because it emphasizes that masculinity is not a single uniform possession of all men. Rather, it is a hierarchy of masculine ideals that legitimates men's dominance and organizes social expectations. Hegemonic masculinity historically values autonomy, authority, heterosexuality, economic provision, physical strength, emotional control, and technical competence, and empirical work on the everyday rules young men endorse—the so-called “Man Box”—finds these expectations still widely held across national contexts (Heilman et al., 2017). In their reformulation, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stress that hegemony works less through the brute domination of individual men over individual women than through the cultural ascendancy of a configuration of practice to which both men and women are held accountable; Messerschmidt (2018) subsequently disaggregates the concept into dominating, hegemonic, and positive variants, underscoring that the ideal is plural and contested rather than monolithic.

The “fellow bro” statement draws on this hierarchy. The woman's behaviour is admired because it aligns with traits historically associated with hegemonic masculinity: self-sufficiency, physical capability, household authority, economic independence, and practical competence. Yet the admiration is conditional. She becomes recognizable as exceptional precisely because these traits are not expected of women within the traditional gender order. Her competence is legible as achievement only against a backdrop in which it is assumed to be unusual.

This is where the statement becomes analytically revealing. The man does not say, “I call her an adult,” “I call her capable,” or “I call her independent.” He says, “fellow bro.” This response shows that the cultural category of “bro” operates as a shorthand for a particular kind of competence and social belonging. Brotherhood is not merely friendship among men; it is a symbolic community organized around shared codes of toughness, utility, humour, and recognition (Kimmel, 2008). To call the woman a “fellow bro” is to invite her into that symbolic community, but on terms already defined by masculinity. The gesture may appear progressive because it recognizes women’s competence. Yet it may also reproduce gender hierarchy by treating masculine-coded behaviour as the standard against which competence is measured. The woman is praised not because femininity has been expanded, but because she has been interpreted as having exceeded it.

**Precarious Manhood and the Labour of Proof:** The question arises as to why a woman’s competence requires formal validation or leads to reclassification, rather than being accepted without comment. The literature on precarious manhood offers a compelling explanation. Vandello and Bosson (2013), drawing on extensive cross-cultural and experimental research, argue that manhood is widely perceived as a status that is difficult to achieve and easily lost, requiring continual public demonstration and subject to revocation. In contrast, womanhood is typically regarded as a developmental given, closely linked to the body and age. Because manhood is conferred rather than inherently possessed, it generates chronic anxiety and a persistent demand for proof, resulting in boundaries that are actively and continually monitored.

Within this framework, the “fellow bro” remark functions as an act of boundary maintenance, though it is notably generous. The criteria associated with manhood, provision, repair, physical

capability, and self-reliance have been met by an individual whose body does not conventionally align with these expectations, presenting a challenge for social categorization. The speaker resolves this dissonance not by denying the woman's competence or broadening the definition of womanhood, but by provisionally granting her membership in the category whose criteria she has fulfilled. The need to adjudicate competence in this way highlights that manhood is perceived as an achievement subject to ongoing evaluation. The woman's self-sufficiency does not merely enhance her identity; it reclassifies her, as the prevailing system cannot recognize practical authority as anything other than masculine without fundamentally altering its own standards.

**Domestic Labour and the Gendering of Space:** The tasks described in the opening vignette are significant due to their location within the domestic sphere. Classical gender ideology typically divides labour into public and private domains: men are associated with the public sphere of paid employment, politics, protection, and provision, while women are linked to the private sphere of care, cleaning, cooking, and emotional maintenance. However, the home itself is also internally gendered. Not all domestic labour is feminized. Tasks such as cooking, laundry, child care, and routine cleaning are frequently coded as feminine, whereas lawn care, repairs, gutter maintenance, heavy lifting, and moving furniture are coded as masculine.

This distinction is important because it demonstrates that masculinity has consistently played a role within the home. Men's domestic authority is typically associated not with the routine maintenance of daily life, but with episodic, visible, physically demanding, or technically specialized tasks. Activities such as fixing, building, lifting, and repairing carry a different symbolic value compared to washing, folding, wiping, and caring. The former are often regarded

as skilled interventions, while the latter are considered ordinary obligations. The asymmetry does not stem from the difficulty of the work, but from its cultural prestige: masculine-coded domestic labour is more frequently framed as competence, whereas feminine-coded labour is more readily naturalized as duty.

The opening example demonstrates the persistence of this hierarchy. When a woman performs masculine-coded domestic labour, she is not merely completing chores; she is entering a domain where practical authority has been historically masculinized. The ability to pay bills invokes the provider role, while the capacity to repair and lift aligns with the protector-maintainer role. Managing outdoor and structural tasks evokes the image of household mastery. These activities are not neutral within the cultural imagination; they are embedded in the symbolic architecture of gender. Consequently, the phrase “fellow bro” underscores how the domestic sphere continues to serve as a site for the production of masculinity. Masculinity is constructed not only in workplaces, sports, politics, military institutions, or peer groups, but also through activities such as maintaining gutters, lawns, tools, bills, furniture, and bodily exertion. Everyday household tasks thus become arenas in which gender is assigned, confirmed, challenged, or reinterpreted.

## **The Masculinization of Female Independence**

This vignette illustrates a broader contemporary phenomenon: the masculinization of female independence. In numerous societies, women's economic and practical autonomy has increased significantly (Risman, 2018; Reeves, 2022). Women now pay bills, own property, lead organizations, manage households, perform manual labour, use tools, and live without reliance on men. However, cultural language often fails to articulate this independence without employing masculine terminology.

Women who assert themselves are frequently labelled as “strong,” although this term can imply emotional hardness. Women who lead decisively may be described as “alpha,” while those who avoid dependence are sometimes praised for exhibiting “masculine energy.” Women who perform practical labour may be referred to as “one of the boys.” These phrases suggest that gender equality has not necessarily led to gender neutrality. Instead, it has often resulted in the reallocation of masculine-coded value to women who meet traditionally masculine standards. Schippers (2007) highlights the disciplinary aspect of this dynamic: women who display masculine-coded qualities risk being perceived as “pariah” figures whose gender transgressions require regulation. The apparent warmth of a term such as “bro” functions as a form of containment that operates through inclusion rather than stigma.

Recognition is never merely descriptive; it can also discipline the boundaries of gender. Being called a “fellow bro” may sound complimentary, but it also implies that the woman's competence becomes most intelligible when placed near masculinity. Her independence is acknowledged, yet the language used to recognize it preserves masculinity as the symbolic standard. The result is a form of inclusion that does not fully unsettle the hierarchy it appears to cross. This is symbolic

incorporation: recognition is granted, but the terms of recognition remain masculine. Rather than dismantling the gender binary, incorporation allows select women to access masculine-coded spaces while preserving the prestige of masculinity. The category “bro” is broad enough to include exceptional women, but not to the point of dissolving the hierarchy that underpins their inclusion.

Contemporary discussions of men frequently centre on crisis: declining male educational achievement, changing labour markets, transformations in family structure, feminist critique, shifting sexual norms, and the weakening of the male breadwinner model (Reeves, 2022). Although “crisis of masculinity” narratives can be overstated and have recurred for over a century, they indicate a genuine destabilization of traditional masculine scripts. Reeves (2022) contends that some of the dislocation men experience is substantive, particularly in education, employment, and health, while cautioning against framing male difficulty and female advancement as a zero-sum contest.

When women are able to pay their own bills, perform repairs, lift heavy objects, maintain property, and live autonomously, the traditional masculine claim to necessity is fundamentally challenged. A central tenet of patriarchal masculinity has been the assertion that women require men for protection, provision, and practical survival. The woman described in the vignette contests this premise. She does not rely on a man to pay, repair, carry, mow, or manage. Her competence disrupts the established gender arrangement. The masculine claim to indispensability, previously based on an asymmetry of capability, becomes untenable once that asymmetry is removed.

The man's response can therefore be read as both recognition and defensive humour. By calling her a "bro," he converts potential gender disruption into camaraderie. The joke softens the challenge posed by women's self-sufficiency: if a woman performs tasks once treated as evidence of male indispensability, she is not allowed simply to expose the arbitrariness of those gender codes; she is instead symbolically absorbed into them. Although this response is not necessarily antagonistic and may even be affectionate, it remains sociologically significant. The statement preserves masculinity from obsolescence by reframing women's competence as evidence of masculine affiliation, rather than as proof that the gendering of competence was arbitrary.

## **Hybrid Masculinities and the Dynamics of Flexible Patriarchy**

The concept of hybrid masculinities, as articulated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), offers a robust framework for examining the adaptability of contemporary masculine identities. Hybrid masculinity refers to the selective incorporation of traits associated with femininity or marginalized masculinities into the gender performances of privileged men. While this integration may seem progressive, it frequently leaves foundational structures of gender inequality intact. Bridges and Pascoe identify mechanisms including discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and boundary reinforcement through which ostensibly softened masculinities continue to reproduce privilege in more nuanced forms.

The use of the term “fellow bro” operates in a similar fashion. Although it appears to relax strict gender boundaries by including a woman in masculine camaraderie, this inclusion does not necessarily diminish the prestige associated with masculinity. Instead, it may reinforce masculinity as the symbolic centre. The woman is recognized not through a revaluation of femininity, but through her proximity to brotherhood. This phenomenon exemplifies flexible patriarchy. Contemporary gender orders do not always depend on rigid exclusion; rather, they may function through selective inclusion, irony, humour, and conditional recognition. Women may be admitted to masculine-coded spaces if they display valued masculine traits, yet the criteria for recognition remain governed by masculine norms.

This adaptability enhances the resilience of contemporary masculinity. Masculinity can respond to feminism, increased female autonomy, and evolving labour dynamics by presenting itself as inclusive, ironic, emotionally intelligent, or egalitarian, while retaining symbolic authority. It no longer requires excluding all women to maintain dominance; rather, it can incorporate select women as honorary members while continuing to set the standards of prestige. As a result, the gender order becomes more permeable at its boundaries but remains highly durable at its core.

**Inclusive Masculinities, Caring Masculinities, and the Limits of Reform:** *While* hybrid masculinity theory approaches contemporary shifts with skepticism, other scholars interpret these changes as evidence of substantive transformation. Inclusive masculinity theory asserts that, in contexts marked by declining cultural homophobia, the boundaries of acceptable masculinity have broadened, permitting a wider emotional repertoire and less aggressive enforcement of difference than previous models suggest (Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2018). From this perspective, extending the term “bro” to competent women may reflect a fraternity that is genuinely open rather than defensively exclusive. Elliott (2016), through the concept of caring masculinities, further identifies masculine identities that reject domination and embrace values of interdependence, emotional openness, and care, identities that, in principle, do not require translating competence into conquest.

These optimistic perspectives have faced substantial critique, which is directly relevant to the interpretation of the vignette. de Boise (2015) questions whether a decline in homophobia necessarily signals a reduction in sexism, noting that men may adopt inclusive practices while perpetuating misogyny and gender inequality. O'Neill (2015) situates inclusive masculinity within a postfeminist framework, cautioning that narratives of progress may obscure ongoing male privilege and depoliticize power analysis. This debate is significant because inclusion and co-optation, as illustrated by the "fellow bro" scenario, are often difficult to distinguish; both can preserve the underlying hierarchy of value. Although the fraternity may have become more accessible, it remains the fraternity to which one is admitted, and prestige continues to derive from the masculine category. In a genuinely transformed gender order, a woman's competence would be recognized as an ordinary aspect of her womanhood, without necessitating reclassification or translation. The persistent need for relabeling underscores the distance yet to be traversed toward such an order.

## **The Concept of “Bro” as a Gendered Social Form**

The term “bro” warrants particular scholarly attention, as it is not merely a synonym for “man.” Rather, it encapsulates a distinct cultural milieu. “Bro” connotes informality, male bonding, joking intimacy, loyalty, physicality, and peer recognition. It is less formal than “man” and less institutional than “patriarch.” The term is embedded in everyday contexts such as gyms, sports, workplaces, memes, friendships, online spaces, and informal male networks (Kimmel, 2008). In the vignette, the accompanying term “fellow” is itself an older designation for a man, rendering the compliment doubly marked by masculinity: the speaker selects masculine vocabulary twice, rather than opting for a neutral or feminine alternative.

Referring to someone as “bro” situates them within a sphere of masculine familiarity. The term’s meaning can be affectionate, humorous, or dismissive, depending on context. In the vignette, the phrase “fellow bro” implies that the woman has achieved recognition through her actions, demonstrating competence that renders her intelligible within a masculine peer group. This phrase exemplifies the micro-level social construction of masculinity. Masculinity is not solely imposed by institutions; it is also perpetuated through subtle linguistic practices. Jokes, nicknames, compliments, and casual phrases can reinforce gender meanings. Such language socializes individuals regarding which behaviours are classified as masculine, which as feminine, and which may require reclassification.

The figure of the “bro” represents horizontal recognition among men, in contrast to roles such as father, boss, soldier, or patriarch, which denote hierarchical authority. This distinction is significant because contemporary masculinity is frequently structured less by formal authority and more by peer validation (Kimmel, 2008). Masculine identity is constructed not only through the subordination of women but also through recognition by other men. In the vignette, the woman attains this recognition, but only by being symbolically repositioned within male homosocial discourse. Her inclusion in the peer group is genuine, yet it is entry into a group whose symbolic capital remains masculine; thus, the recognition she receives is inseparable from the process of renaming she experiences.

**Beyond Essentialism:** Tasks Are Not Inherently Gendered. The sociological significance of the vignette is partly rooted in its absurdity. There is nothing inherently male about activities such as mowing a lawn, repairing a wall, paying a bill, lifting a box, or cleaning a gutter. These tasks demand skills, tools, financial resources, time, strength, or knowledge, but none inherently requires masculinity. The gendering of these activities is a product of historical, cultural, and relational processes rather than natural necessity (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

This argument does not deny the significance of embodiment. Certain tasks require physical exertion, and societies frequently interpret bodily differences through the lens of gender. However, the association between physical capacity and masculine identity is socially constructed rather than natural. Many women possess physical strength or technical skill, and many men do not. Similarly, women often provide financial support, while some men are financially dependent on them. Halberstam (1998) demonstrated in the study of female masculinity that masculinity has never

been the exclusive domain of men, and its most recognizable cultural forms can be performed, often more distinctly, by individuals who are not male, even though such performances are frequently dismissed as imitation. The persistence of gender coding despite this variation indicates that masculinity functions less as a biological fact and more as a cultural explanation imposed on specific actions.

The “fellow bro” joke exemplifies this process by framing competence as a form of gender transgression. When a woman performs these tasks, prevailing social norms do not discard the gender code; instead, they reposition her within it. This dynamic illustrates how gender categories persist despite contradiction. When empirical reality challenges normative expectations, the norm is frequently maintained through reinterpretation rather than revision. This conservative epistemic strategy preserves the category, often at the expense of accurately representing the individual.

**Intersectional Considerations:** Although the vignette does not specify race, class, sexuality, age, or cultural context, a comprehensive sociological analysis must recognize that masculinity is never constructed in isolation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). The meaning of “fellow bro” varies according to the woman’s social position. For working-class women, physical labour and household competence may be routine necessities rather than exceptional achievements. For racialized women, strength and self-sufficiency are often shaped by histories of labour exploitation, stereotyping, and survival, so that the label “strong” can entail both burdens and praise. For queer women, masculine-coded competence may intersect with assumptions about sexuality or gender presentation. For middle-class professional women, proficiency in traditionally

masculine tasks may be interpreted as empowerment, lifestyle autonomy, or neoliberal self-sufficiency (O'Neill, 2015).

Similarly, men's relationships to these tasks are shaped by class and race. The ideal of the handy, physically capable, economically independent man does not apply uniformly to all men. Some forms of masculinity are linked to professional authority rather than manual skill, while others are stigmatized as rough, excessive, or threatening when enacted by marginalized men. Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, does not encompass all men equally; it privileges specific configurations of manhood while subordinating others (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018). An intersectional analysis prevents the universalization of the "bro" category. Brotherhood is always contextually situated. Questions such as who is affectionately called "bro," who is excluded, who is deemed competent or deviant, and who is praised or punished for strength reveal that masculinity is not a singular, stable essence but a contested social field.

## Conclusion

The phrase “fellow bro” is sociologically significant because it transforms a routine acknowledgment of competence into an act of gender classification. The humour embedded in this expression relies on a prevailing cultural assumption: that activities such as paying bills, repairing the home, mowing the lawn, lifting heavy objects, and managing practical tasks are symbolically associated with masculinity. Consequently, the woman in the vignette is not simply recognized as capable; her competence is framed within the language of masculine affiliation.

This phenomenon matters because it demonstrates how contemporary masculinity endures despite the erosion of its traditional boundaries. Increased participation by women in employment, property ownership, household management, technical tasks, and physical labour has rendered previous assertions of male exclusivity less tenable. Nevertheless, the meanings ascribed to these activities frequently remain gendered. Rather than discarding masculine codes, the social order adapts by selectively extending them to individuals who exhibit valued forms of independence, strength, and practical authority.

The vignette ultimately illustrates that masculinity is characterized by both instability and resilience. Instability arises because the practices historically used to define masculinity are no longer exclusive to men. Resilience persists as autonomy, provision, repair, and self-sufficiency continue to be articulated through masculine terminology. Achieving a more profound transformation would necessitate more than simply extending masculine-coded recognition to women; it would require reconceptualizing competence as a universal human capacity, rather than attributing strength, independence, and practical authority solely to masculinity.

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