

Jeffery Dahmer's Defense Mechanism in *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) Movie: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explain how Jeffery Dahmer's defense mechanism is portrayed in *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) movie and analyze its effects on his character. This research uses qualitative content analysis research with a psychoanalytic approach. The result of this study indicates four types of defense mechanisms exhibited by Jeffrey Dahmer. Denial was evident as Dahmer downplayed disturbing actions, leading to increased social disconnection. Projection, showcased through dramatic performances, resulted in strained relationships and discomfort from peers. Displacement, expressed through destructive actions on preserving dead animals, generated discomfort, and disgust from those around him. Isolation, depicted in sneaking a sip of his dad's scotch and excessive alcohol consumption, emphasized Dahmer's difficulty in connecting with others. These defense mechanisms collectively contributed to negative effects, including heightened social disconnection, strained relationships, and an escalating pattern of isolation in Dahmer's life. This research is anticipated to enhance understanding of defense mechanism portrayed in *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) movie and aims to raise public awareness by examining Jeffery Dahmer's defense mechanism in the same film.

Keywords: defense mechanism, my friend dahmer movie, psychoanalytic approach

Introduction

Exploring literary works involves a captivating journey through the diverse forms of human expression like novel, poetry, play, and more. These works act as mirrors reflecting the beliefs, values, and dreams of different cultures over time (Frye, 2020). When we analyze literature, we engage in critical thinking about its characters, themes, symbols, and narrative techniques to uncover its deep messages. Frye (2020) proposes that literary works should contain themes, characters, and symbols that are universal and transcend specific cultures and time periods. According to Barthes (1967), literature is a system of signs and symbols, emphasizing that it is a complex structure of language that readers interpret and find meaning in. Through education and personal reflection, literary works become a conduit for language development, intellectual growth, and self-discovery.

Literary works and film are closely connected and can learn from each other (Stam and Raengo, 2005). Film takes inspiration from books, real events, or even other movies and transforms them into something new. It is an art form involving directors, writers, and actors who make creative choices in cinematography, editing, and sound design to express their visions. In films, we often discover important messages conveyed through themes and ideas within the story. Characterization is a crucial aspect of making a film more creative. It is how authors portray the unique traits of each character, bringing them to life and effectively conveying the story's messages. Characters in a story are like actors in a literary work, each with their distinct personality traits. Personality encompasses a character's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, defining who they are and how they act in the story. Erdelyi (1985) states that psychoanalysis is suitable to explore the individual personalities. Psychoanalytic theory is a psychological framework that delves into the hidden aspects of the human mind to understand how they shape behavior and personality. According to Eagleton (2011), the acknowledgment of this dual role of psychoanalysis highlights its significance not only in the theoretical understanding of human behavior and personality but also as a practical and therapeutic tool for addressing mental health concerns.

Allport (1937) defines personality is the unique way each person organizes their thoughts and feelings, which influences how they adapt to their environment. This definition highlights how everyone's distinct qualities shape their responses to the world around them. A person's personality can be clearly shown when they deal with anxiety, fear, and uneasy emotions, which is referred to as defense mechanism. Defense mechanism is fundamental psychological strategies that individuals use to protect themselves from distressing emotions, thoughts, or situations. Sigmund Freud highlights the link between defense mechanism and anxiety, as these mechanisms serve as protective tools against anxiety-inducing thoughts and emotions (Traylor et al., 2022). These mechanisms help maintain psychological balance by managing the conflicting demands of the id, ego, and superego. The relationship between defense mechanism and anxiety lies in how these mechanisms serve as protective strategies against anxiety-provoking thoughts and emotions.

According to [Freud \(2014\)](#), in its early and relatively condensed form, the concept of defense mechanism includes strategies like, denial, projection, displacement, sublimation, reaction formation, undoing, and isolation. Denial involves a refusal to acknowledge or accept the reality of a situation, often as a way to reduce anxiety or protect one's well-being. By refusing to accept the reality of a situation, they hope to reduce the immediate anxiety or distress associated with it ([Di Giuseppe and Perry, 2021](#)). Denial typically leads to negative effects, as avoiding the reality of a situation may hinder personal growth and effective problem-solving in the long run. Projection involves attributing one's own thoughts, feelings, desires, or characteristics to another person. By attributing these aspects to someone else, they avoid taking responsibility for them. [McWilliams, \(2023\)](#) states that projection operates on an unconscious level. It means that individuals are typically not aware that they are projecting their own thoughts or feelings onto someone else. Projection usually leads to negative effects, as it can strain relationships, hinder effective communication, and create misunderstandings when individuals fail to acknowledge and address their own emotions and desires. Displacement involves redirecting one's emotions, often negative ones, from their original source or target to a different, typically less threatening person, object, or situation. According to [Main, \(2023\)](#) displacement happens when individuals unconsciously express a desire in a way that does not directly relate to the original desire. Displacement usually leads to negative effects, as redirecting emotions can create misunderstandings, strain relationships, and result in inappropriate reactions that may not address the underlying issues. Sublimation involves channeling socially unacceptable or potentially harmful impulses, desires, or emotions into more socially acceptable and constructive activities. [Corey \(2013\)](#), adds that it is more adaptive coping mechanism because it helps individuals transform negative or socially unacceptable impulses into positive and productive actions. Sublimation is generally considered a positive effect, as it leads to constructive and socially acceptable behaviors, allowing individuals to express their impulses in ways that contribute positively to their personal and social well-being. Reaction Formation involves behaving in a manner that is directly opposite to one's true feelings, desires, or impulses. [Corey \(2013\)](#), states that this reversal is a way to protect the individual from acknowledging or dealing with unacceptable or distressing emotions. reaction formation usually leads to negative effects, as the internal contradiction between expressed behavior and true feelings can result in emotional turmoil, strained relationships, and an overall lack of authenticity. Undoing typically arises in response to guilt, anxiety, or distress caused by one's own actions, thoughts, or desires. [Di Giuseppe and Perry \(2021\)](#), state that when individuals experience these negative emotions, they may feel compelled to "undo" their perceived wrongdoing. Undoing usually leads to negative effects, as the attempts to undo or make up for perceived wrongs may not effectively address the underlying issues, potentially perpetuating a cycle of guilt and distress. Isolation involves separating disturbing or distressing thoughts, feelings, or memories from the associated emotions. [Di Giuseppe and Perry \(2021\)](#), add that it is a way for individuals to acknowledge or recall a distressing event or memory without actually feeling the associated emotions. Isolation usually leads to negative effects, as detaching emotions from memories can hinder emotional processing and may contribute to a sense of emotional numbness or disconnection from one's experiences. These mechanisms help to maintain psychological equilibrium by balancing the conflicting demands of the id, ego, and superego. [Freud \(1989\)](#) outlines the structural model of the human mind, introducing the id, ego, and superego. The id represents our primal desires, the ego is the rational mediator, and the superego embodies our moral values. This work underscores how defense mechanism, like repression and denial, are used by the ego to manage conflicts between the id's desires and the superego's moral standards, offering a profound understanding of human behavior and psychological coping strategies.

Defense mechanism is not just something we encounter in real life; many authors of literary works often portray patterns of defense mechanism in the characters of their works. One such literary works is *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) movie. In real life, Jeffrey Dahmer was America's most notorious serial killer. He was responsible for the murders of 17 young men between 1978 and 1991 ([Mulroy, 2023](#)). He lured and drugged his victims, engaged in gruesome acts, and dismembered their bodies, ultimately leading to his capture in 1991 and subsequent life imprisonment. Dahmer's life ended tragically when he was killed by a fellow inmate in 1994. He was born in 1960, grew up in Ohio, USA. As a child, he showed signs of disturbing behavior and cruelty to animals ([Colin McEvoy, 2023](#)).

My Friend Dahmer is a biographical drama that tells the real-life story set in the United States. The film was officially released in April 17, 2017. *My friend Dahmer* movie is adaptation draws its inspiration from the 2012 graphic novel, which shares its title, written by cartoonist John "Derf" Backderf. During the 1970s, Backderf was acquainted with Dahmer while they were in college, until the period when Dahmer initiated his sequence of murders ([Gleiberman, 2017](#)). This film is based on a real-life serial killer, Jeffery Dahmer, but in *My Friend Dahmer* movie, it only portrays his life before he became a serial killer.

In the 1970s, in a suburban Ohio town, the movie introduces a young Jeffrey Dahmer, played by Ross Lynch. He is a socially awkward high school student dealing with family issues, including his parents' messy divorce and his mother's mental health problems, which make him feel increasingly isolated and sad ([Breitowich, 2022](#)). The film does not avoid the unsettling aspects of Dahmer's life. It shows his disturbing interest in death and gruesome experiments with roadkill

and animals, suggesting a dark side to his character (Grant, 2022). These early signs of his issues become more disturbing as the story unfolds. Dahmer's strange behavior catches the attention of a group of classmates, led by Derf Backderf (played by Alex Wolff). They form an odd friendship with Dahmer, attracted to his peculiar actions and unusual sense of humor. However, there is an eerie feeling that something is not right as Dahmer's mental state deteriorates. Throughout the film, the viewers witness Dahmer's gradual descent into madness. His struggles with loneliness, alcohol abuse, and growing obsession with dark desires are portrayed in detail.

There is only one study by Laksono (2021) that addressed the film *My Friend Dahmer*, and it specifically delves into the personality disorder of the character. In contrast, many studies have explored defense mechanism in various films. Martins (2019) discussed defense mechanism used by Norman Bates from *Psycho* movie. This study found that Norman deals with his issues by repressing, projecting, and rationalizing to handle the conflict between him and his dependency on his mother, he turns to denial. Additionally, Norman employs identification to cope with the conflict tied to his dependency and his obsession with his mother. Saputra (2022) discussed the defense mechanism and anxiety exhibit by Arthur Fleck from *Joker* movie. This study identifies repression when Arthur denies his adopted status and projects his anger and frustration onto his mother. Displacement is evident as Arthur channels his energy into violent outbursts, particularly when attacked on the train. Finally, fantasy serves as a coping mechanism for Arthur, enabling him to escape his harsh reality. However, these defense mechanisms contribute to his descent into criminality and violence, illustrating the complex interplay between psychological defenses and the unraveling of Arthur's sanity.

Based on the reasons previously stated, the researchers interested to examine how Jeffery Dahmer in the movie "My Friend Dahmer" (2017) employs defense mechanism to cope with his challenges and difficulties, and its effects by conducting a research entitled: "Jeffery Dahmer's Defense Mechanism in My Friend Dahmer (2017) Movie: A Psychoanalytic Approach."

Method

The type of this study employs qualitative content analysis with a psychoanalytic approach. Qualitative content analysis is about studying written or recorded information to understand how people behave, with these materials can come from various sources like reports, letters, movies, or even diaries (Ary et al., 2018: 29). This study takes a psychoanalytic approach to explore the main character in the movie.

In this study, the formal object is the utilization of defense mechanism by the main character, and the material object is the movie *My Friend Dahmer* (2017). This study focuses on the defense mechanism employed by the main character and the effects of this mechanism on the character's behavior.

There are two data sources used in this study. The primary data are the dialogues and scenes from the "My Friend Dahmer" (2017) movie, and the secondary data are taken from the previous studies collected, as well as from journals, thesis, and websites.

In collecting data, the researchers repeatedly watched the movie, reviewed articles, and journals, recognized specific scene or dialogues that shows the character's use of defense mechanism, and categorized each scene and dialogue into distinct groups based on Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism theory.

To analyze the data, researchers adopted Miles and Huberman's method. Miles and Huberman (1992, as cited in Sugiyono, 2016: 163) emphasize a structured process comprising three key steps in data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Results and Discussion

1. How Defense Mechanism of Jeffery Dahmer is Portrayed in My Friend Dahmer Movie

The researchers applied Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism theory to analyze the behavior of Jeffery Dahmer in *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) movie. The goal is to demonstrate how Jeffery Dahmer used defense mechanism to cope with challenges in his daily life. According to Baumeister et al., (1998), there are only seven Freud's original list of defense mechanism, namely, denial, projection, displacement, sublimation, reaction formation, undoing, and isolation. Jeffery Dahmer's defense mechanism can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Jeffery Dahmer's Defense Mechanism

No	Type of Defense Mechanism	Data	Source	Meaning
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1. Denial	<p><u>Dialogue 1.1.1:</u></p> <p>Bossy : “Hey, Dahmer what’s in the bag?”</p> <p>Bossy : “Dead cat?”</p> <p>Dahmer : “Well, I’m gonna dissolve it. In some acid.”</p> <p>Bossy : “What? So full of crap.”</p> <p>Dahmer : “My dad’s chemist. Got my hands on it easy.”</p> <p>Lanky : “Yeah, right.”</p> <p>Dahmer : “Well, come see if you don’t believe me.”</p>	<p>(00:04:36-00:05:10)</p> <p>In this scene, when Dahmer shows his friends a dead cat and talks about dissolving it in acid, they find it shocking. Despite their disbelief, Dahmer denies their doubts and insists he can easily get the acid because his father is a chemist.</p>
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Figure 1.1.1



(00:34:35-00:34:53)

In this scene, Jeffery Dahmer appears to deny his actions when Neil tells him to release the fish. Instead of following the instructions, Dahmer violently mutilates the fish, offering a casual explanation that he was curious about its appearance.

Dialogue 1.1.2:

Neil : “Just cut the line, Jeff.”

Neil : “Hey”

Neil : “Jeff, what the hell? I said throw him back.”

Dahmer : “Sorry”

Derf : “Why'd you do that?”

Dahmer : “I just wanted to see what its inside looked like.”

2. Projection

Figure 1.2.1



(00:25:59-00:26:26)

In the cafeteria, Jeff is invited to join classmates. He subtly changes his demeanor, responding with a genuine smile to their attention and humor.

Dialogue 1.2.1:

Kent : “Kuddos for your freaking spazzes, dude. Totally classic.”

Derf : “Yeah. We dig it. Where'd you get the idea?”

Kent : “Like, you know what it reminds me of? This decorator in town my parents hired.”

Kent : “Used to have these little fits in our living room until, you know, they just fired him.”

Dahmer : “Oh, yeah, Mr. Burlman. My parents hired him too.”

Kent : “Yeah, I knew it.”

Dahmer : “Yeah, but after five months, all he added was a pink footstool. And lacy drapes.”

[Figure 1.2.2](#)



[Dialogue 1.2.2:](#)

Dahmer : “Hello?”
Dahmer : “Yes, we're from William Dawes High in Ohio.”
Dahmer : “Just in the middle of nowhere.”
Dahmer : “Yes, we're honor students, and part of the school newspaper...”
Dahmer : “Oh, yeah, Mr. Burlman. My parents hired him too.”
Dahmer : “...and we're very interested in politics.”
Dahmer : “And we were wondering if we could interview you as an aide to the vice president of the United States?
Dahmer : “on Constitutional Avenue”
Dahmer : “Okay. Great.”

(00:54:45-00:55:23)

In this scene, Jeff confidently calls the Vice President's office and secures an interview.

3. Displacement

[Figure 1.3.1](#)



[Figure 1.3.2](#)





(00:05:39-00:06:37)

In this scene, Jeffery Dahmer collects animals and places them in jars, demonstrating his fascination with studying bones and preservation.

(01:25:20-01:26:15)

In this scene, Dahmer attends the prom with Bridget. He feels increasingly uneasy in the social setting, surrounded by his classmates and experiencing the pressure to appear normal. As he dances with Bridget, he appears rigid and uncomfortable.



4.	Sublimation	–	–	–
5.	Reaction Formation	–	–	–
6.	Undoing	–	–	–
7.	Isolation	Figure 1.7.1	(00:01:33-00:02:42)	In this scene, Jeffrey Dahmer rides the school bus, physically distancing himself from the other students by sitting alone in the middle of the bus.
				
		Figure 1.7.2	(01:03:11-01:04:13)	In this scene, Dahmer sits apart from the group of his peers who are getting high and engaged in casual banter. While they discuss various topics and share inside jokes, Jeff remains on the fringes of the conversation.
				

In the analyzed scenes from *My Friend Dahmer* movie, Jeffrey Dahmer employs defense mechanism proposed by Sigmund Freud. However, the researchers did not find sublimation, reaction formation, and undoing from Jeffrey Dahmer in *My Friend Dahmer* movie. Denial is evident as he downplays the disturbing nature of his actions when confronted about carrying a dead cat or mutilating a fish. This behavior aligns with what [Di Giuseppe and Perry, \(2021\)](#) say that by refusing to accept the reality of a situation, they hope to reduce the immediate anxiety or distress associated with it. Projection allows Dahmer to project a sociable persona to fit in. This behavior aligns with what Sigmund Freud ([1915, as cited in Baumeister et al., 1998](#)) posits that projection serves as a self-defense mechanism to protect the individual's ego from acknowledging or dealing with uncomfortable or distressing emotions, desires, or characteristics. While displacement serves as a coping strategy, redirecting inner turmoil towards destructive actions on preserved animals. This behavior aligns with what [Main, \(2023\)](#) posits, suggesting that displacement happens when individuals unconsciously express a desire in a way that does not directly relate to the original desire. Isolation is a recurring theme, emphasizing Dahmer's difficulty in connecting with others. This behavior aligns with what Sigmund Freud ([1926, as cited in Baumeister et al., 1998](#)) asserts, stating that isolation does not make scary thoughts go away; it just makes them less strong and less bothersome.

2. The Effect of Jeffery Dahmer's Defense Mechanism in My Friend Dahmer Movie


Researchers observed that Jeffery Dahmer used various defense mechanism. These mechanisms have eight noticeable effects on the character's actions and behaviors. It can be seen in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. The Effect of Jeffery Dahmer's Defense Mechanism

No	Type of Defense Mechanism	Data	Effect	Explanation
1.	Denial	a. Dahmer denies their doubts and tries to convince them that he can access the acid easily due to his father's profession as a chemist. This denial can be seen as an attempt to minimize or deflect attention away from the disturbing nature of his actions. (Dialogue 1.1.1)	a. Figure 2.1.1  Dahmer's tendency to be alone is evident in school, further highlighting his social isolation and disconnection from peers.	a. Dahmer's denial leads to the negative effect of exacerbating his social disconnection. By refusing to acknowledge doubts and attempting to justify easy access to acid through his father's profession as a chemist, Dahmer inadvertently intensifies the isolation he experiences.
		b. Jeffery Dahmer appears to deny his actions when Neil tells him to release the fish. (Dialogue 1.1.2)	b. Figure 2.1.2  Neil's and Derf's reactions indicate a growing discomfort and alienation, as seen from their faces, contributing to Dahmer's sense of isolation.	b. Dahmer's denial leads to the negative effect, deepening his social disconnection from friendship


2. Projection

a. Jeffrey Dahmer uses projection as a defense mechanism to hide his disturbing thoughts and desires, projecting a facade of normalcy to fit in with his peers. ([Dialogue 1.2.1](#))

a. [Figure 2.2.1](#)
 Jeffrey Dahmer's dramatic performances earn laughter and attention from some peers but alienate him from others who find his actions disturbing.

a. Jeffrey Dahmer's projection leads to the negative effect of creating a deceptive facade that masks his disturbing thoughts and desires, resulting in detrimental consequences.


b. Jeff's ability to confidently call the Vice President's office and secure an interview is a notable instance of projection. He projects self-assuredness and leadership, a departure from his usual reserved demeanor. ([Dialogue 1.2.2](#))

b. [Figure 2.2.2](#)
 Dahmer invites Steven Hicks, his first victim, and engages in smooth conversation, luring him into the car with a friendly demeanor.

b. Jeff's projection leads to the negative effect of masking his true intentions, contributing to harmful consequences.

3. Displacement

a. Jeff displaces his pent-up emotions onto preserved animals and jars in the hut, providing a temporary outlet to release tension and inner turmoil. This displacement momentarily

a. [Figure 2.3.1](#)
 His violent outburst, fueled by displaced emotions and a fascination with bones, makes his friends uncomfortable and disgusted.

a. Dahmer's displacement leads to the negative effect of straining his friendships.

vents the inner conflict he faces due to social rejection.

([Figure 1.3.1](#))

b. This scene shows Dahmer using displacement to divert his inner turmoil and frustration from his disturbing desires to the social expectations of the prom. His discomfort and awkwardness in this social setting reflect this displacement. ([Figure 1.3.2](#))

b. [Figure 2.3.2](#)



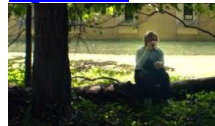
Dahmer's departure from the prom night highlights his discomfort in the social setting. Feeling uneasy amidst cliques and pressured to conform, he struggles on the dance floor. His exit suggests difficulty in navigating social situations, contributing to his growing isolation.

b. Dahmer's displacement leads to the negative effect of intensifying his discomfort and isolation in social settings, as evidenced by his departure from the prom night.

- 4. Sublimation
- 5. Reaction Formation
- 6. Undoing
- 7. Isolation

a. In this scene, Jeffrey Dahmer's isolation is vividly depicted on the school bus as he physically separates himself, choosing to sit alone in the middle. ([Figure 1.7.1](#))

a. [Figure 2.7.1](#)



The scene where Jeff sneaks and drinks a sip of his dad's scotch on the family home's deck.

a. Dahmer's isolation leads to the negative effect of fostering potential reliance on unhealthy coping mechanisms, as suggested by the scene where he sneaks and drinks a sip of his dad's scotch on the family home's deck.

b. The Scene highlights Jeff's difficulty in connecting

b. [Figure 2.7.2](#)

b. Dahmer's isolation leads to the negative effect of exacerbating self-destructive tendencies and

with others and his longing for companionship, emphasizing his sense of isolation ([Figure 1.7.2](#))



Dahmer excessive alcohol consumption in the backseat indicates self-destructive tendencies and potential mental health struggles. Dahmer's discomfort and the perceived "aura of doom".

impacting his mental health, as evidenced by his excessive alcohol consumption in the backseat.

Based on the result of data analysis, Jeffrey Dahmer's use of defense mechanisms, including denial, projection, displacement, and isolation, has negative effects on his mental well-being and social connections. His use of denial to downplay disturbing actions, such as when he mutilated fish and dissolving a cat that exacerbate social disconnection. [Chung \(2023\)](#) emphasizes that while denial might provide a temporary escape, it can lead to severe consequences if the underlying issue is not addressed. The projection of a facade of normalcy through projection leads to strained relationships, as others become uncomfortable with his dramatic performances in the mall. [Smith \(2023\)](#), posits that projection may seem helpful in the short term, but in the end, can harm relationships and hinder personal development. Displacement, expressed through destructive actions on preserved animals, not only showcases inner turmoil but also results in discomfort and disgust from peers. [Rosenblatt \(2023\)](#), adds that displacement has the potential to negatively impact your relationships, self-esteem, and overall happiness. Finally, Dahmer's isolation, vividly portrayed in scenes, such as sneaking a sip of his dad's scotch, and excessive alcohol consumption in the backseat, reflects self-destructive tendencies and intensifies negative emotions and relationships. Those effects are aligned with what [Wardell et al., \(2020\)](#) say that individuals who are isolated tend to drink more alcohol. Overall, the negative effects of Dahmer's defense mechanism collectively contribute to a complex web of negative emotions, strained relationships, and an escalating pattern of isolation in Dahmer's life.

Conclusion

The researchers applied Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism theory to analyze Jeffrey Dahmer's behavior in the "My Friend Dahmer" (2017) movie. Out of Freud's seven original defense mechanisms, Dahmer exhibited denial, projection, displacement, and isolation. Denial was evident in his attempts to downplay disturbing actions, such as mutilating fish, exacerbating social disconnection. The projection, where Dahmer projected a facade of normalcy through dramatic performances, led to strained relationships and discomfort from peers. Displacement was observed as Dahmer redirected inner turmoil towards destructive actions on preserved animals, resulting in discomfort and disgust from those around him. Isolation, a recurring theme depicted in scenes such as, sneaking a sip of his dad's scotch and excessive alcohol consumption, emphasized Dahmer's difficulty in connecting with others. The study found negative effects of Dahmer's defense mechanisms toward himself, including escalating isolation, and increased social disconnection. Additionally, these defense mechanisms had negative impacts on his relationships with others, resulting in strained connections.

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